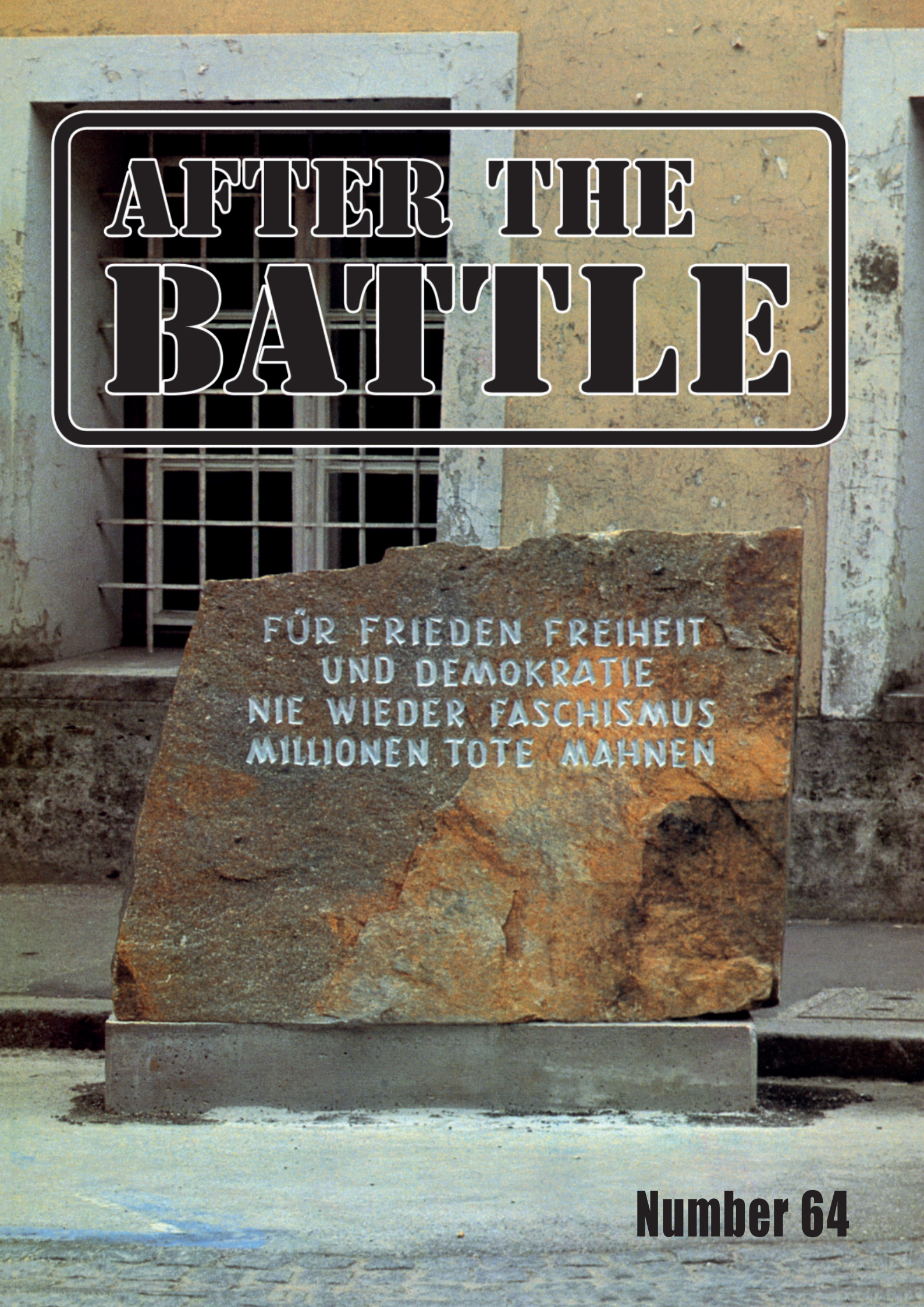
AFTER THE BATTLE



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Front Cover: 'For Peace, Freedom and Democracy . . . No further Fascism . . . Let us remember the millions of dead.' In April 1989 Braunau am Inn, in Austria, grabbed the nettle for the first time since 1945 and erected a monument outside the building where Hitler was born 100 years ago. (Gerhard Bluhm)

Back Cover: The reverse inscription reveals the provenance of the block of stone. Mauthausen, Austria's infamous concentration camp, lies 75 miles away to the east. (Gerhard Bluhm)

Centre Pages Left: On the occasion of his State Visit to Holland in October 1988, HRH The Prince of Wales lays his wreath at the 53rd Division memorial for North West Europe 1944–1945, erected in 's-Hertogenbosch to commemorate the battle to liberate the town in October 1944. (G. W. J. H. van der Tol)

Centre Pages Right: The obelisk on Hekellaan stands on the exact spot along the railway where the first British troops entered the town on October 24, 1944. (G. van Kessel)

Acknowlegements: The Editor would like to record his appreciation to the following for the help and assistance in the research on the feature on the explosion in Bombay: The Bombay Port Trust and its officers including Mr S. Rangel, Assistant Docks Manager; The Bombay Fire Brigade and the Chief Fire Officer, Mr Vijay Vaidya; Captain Rajiv Kapur and Captain Karnik, Indian Merchant Marine; The Times of India and its Archive Head, Mr R. W. Jayaker; Prince Rupert Archives, Canada; Lloyds Register of Shipping, London; Public Record Office, London. Also to Mr L. van Gent, secretary of the Stichting October 1944 's-Hertogenbosch, for his generous help in the production of the story of Den Bosch and to James Rusbridger, Colin Gibbon and Roger Morgan in the follow up on Major Martin.

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The memorial in Bombay docks which commemorates the port employees and others who lost their lives in the huge explosion which devastated the area on April 14, 1944 claiming — officially — 233 lives.

THE BOMBAY EXPLOSION

BY KEVIN PATIENCE

Shortly after four o'clock on the afternoon of April 14, 1944, the explosive-laden cargo ship *Fort Stikine* disintegrated in two devastating explosions alongside Berth No. 1 in the Victoria Dock, Bombay. The destruction was appalling. Within days reports showed at least 350 dead, 1,800 injured and 50,000 made homeless. The damage was estimated at £24 million with ten ships totalling 34,640 tons destroyed or declared a total loss. The circumstances behind one of the greatest man-made explosions in history were shrouded in secrecy and a complete clamp was imposed on all publicity by the military authorities.

The *Fort Stikine* (7,142 GRT), named after a river in British Columbia, was the first of many Fort/Park class lend-lease vessels built in Canada during the Second World War. Completed by the Prince Rupert Dry Dock in July 1942, the vessel was classified 100A1 by Lloyds of London and measured 441 feet long with a 57-foot beam and 35 feet deep — her moulded depth or draft was 27 feet. She was propelled by a 505hp triple expansion steam engine which gave a speed of 11 knots.

Top: **Smoke blackens the sky as labourers run towards the scene of the explosion. The dog sensibly runs the other way!**

Since her delivery the vessel had made four voyages under the command of Captain Alexander Naismith. Her fifth and final voyage commenced at Birkenhead where a general wartime cargo of twelve crated Spitfires and nearly 1,400 tons of mixed explosives, including bombs, shells, torpedoes, mines and flares had been loaded for Bombay. On deck were a number of crated gliders. In No. 2 hold was a steel box 5ft× 4ft×4ft containing 124 gold bars in wooden boxes valued at nearly £1 million destined for the Indian war economy.

The ship departed Birkenhead on February 24, 1944, and joined a south-bound convoy for the Mediterranean. The voyage was uneventful until, off the North African coast near Algiers, the convoy came under air attack by four German Focke-Wulf Condors together with an estimated twenty other aircraft. All the ships responded to the attackers, the four Oerlikons from the *Stikine* adding to the barrage. The raid lasted for half an hour and, when the raiders finally turned for home, five of their number had been shot down.

South of Sicily, the main convoy turned north, leaving twelve ships including the *Stikine* to head for Port Said. After passing through the Suez Canal the ship sailed on alone to Aden where, after a brief coaling stop, she continued on to Karachi across the Arabian Sea. On the afternoon of March 30, the ship docked at Karachi and the stevedores swarmed aboard to commence discharging. First to go were the crated gliders and Spitfires. By the morning of April 3 the last of the Karachi cargo had been discharged. The vessel was riding high and the huge holds were empty, but not for long. Tons of cargo for Bombay arrived by truck and rail and thousands of bales of cotton, drums of lubricating oil, timber, scrap iron, fish manure and rice were all stowed below.

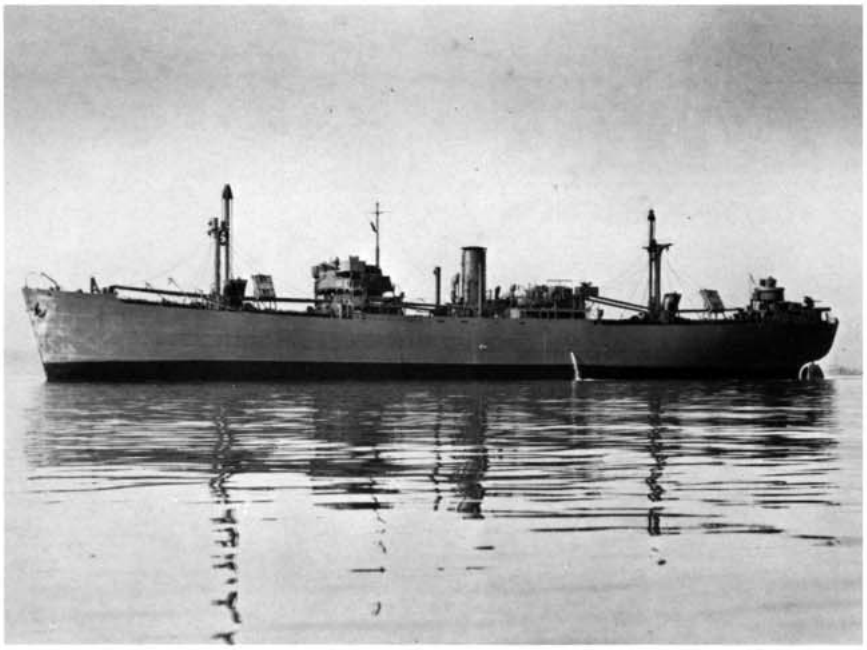
This strange inflammable mixture led Captain Naismith to lodge a protest with the shipping office but he was overruled on the strength of wartime necessity. However the Chief Officer, William Henderson, expressed some doubt about the safe carriage of cotton to Second Officer Norman Harris. The latter referred to his cargo notes but was only able to state that it gave off hydrogen gas if damp.

Unfortunately, no cargo stowage publications or regulations were to hand. Had they been available they would have shown the frightening circumstances in which the ship had been loaded. Regulations stated that cotton is liable to spontaneous combustion if contaminated with oil or grease, and that during loading operations, firefighting equipment should be laid out, and the ship be fitted with steam smothering equipment in the holds. Further notes stated that cotton and explosives should not be stowed in the same hold but at opposite ends of the ship and that oil drums stowed above cotton should be restricted to 250 barrels. In No. 2 hold there were more than four times that amount; consequently the *Stikine* was now loaded with an extremely dangerous cargo combination.

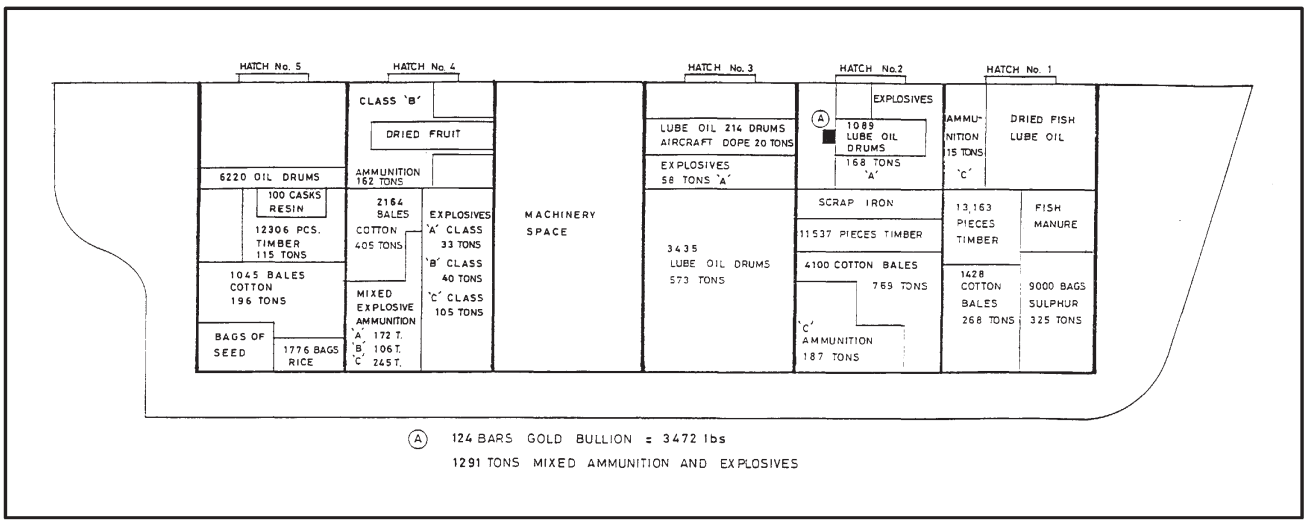
On April 9, the ship sailed for Bombay and the crew took the precaution of carrying out extra fire and boat drills. The three-day voyage was uneventful and, just before midday on April 12, the ship berthed in Victoria Dock, Bombay.

Bombay, the principal seaport on the west coast of India, takes it name from Mumbai the goddess of the Kolis, a tribe of fishermen and farmers from whom the name 'Coolie' or labourer is derived. The discovery of the sea route to India by Vasco de Gama in the 16th century brought the first Portuguese settlers in 1534 to what was then seven islands separated by swamps and mud flats. Over the next hundred years, in-fighting and feudal systems did little to develop the region. Overtures by the East India Company to interest Oliver Cromwell in the area fell on deaf ears. The islands were eventually ceded to Britain in 1661 as part of the bride's dowry when Charles II married Catherine of Braganza. In 1668 the port and island of Bombay was transferred from the Crown to the East India Company for an annual rent of £10 in gold.

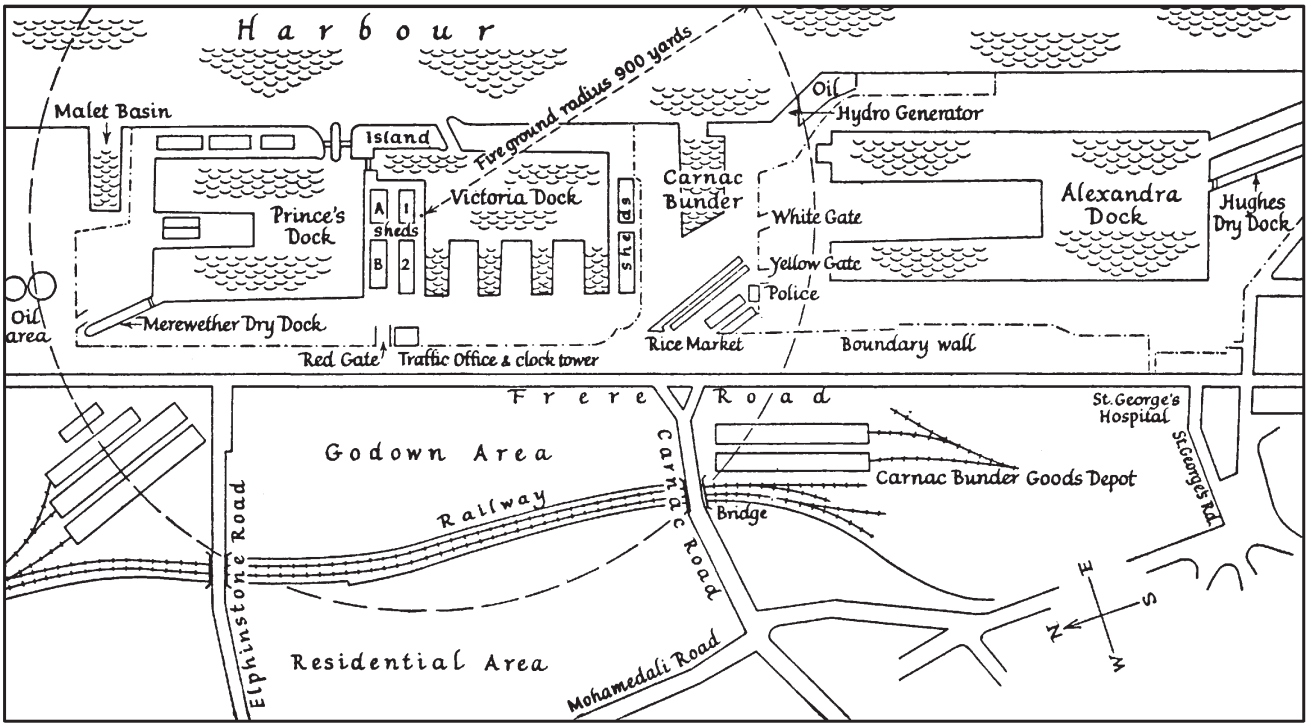
Trade and development expanded the area and new docks were built in 1750. Bombay benefitted from the numerous wars that plagued the British Empire over the years, but it was the American Civil War that brought untold prosperity when the region was found to have suitable cotton for the Lancashire mills to replace the now disbanded American trade. The rapid expan-



The Fort class vessels were built by a number of Canadian shipyards including North Vancouver Ship Repair Ltd., Victoria Machinery Depot Ltd., West Coast Shipbuilders Ltd., and was propelled by engines and boilers from Canadian Allis Chalmers Ltd., and John Inglis Ltd. among others. (National Maritime Museum, London)


HATCH No. 5
HATCH No. 4
HATCH No. 3
HATCH No. 2
HATCH No. 1
6220 OIL DRUMS
100 CASKS RESIN
12306 PCS. TIMBER 115 TONS
1045 BALES COTTON 196 TONS
BAGS OF SEED
1776 BAGS RICE
CLASS 'B'
DRIED FRUIT
AMMUNITION 162 TONS
2164 BALES COTTON 405 TONS
MIXED EXPLOSIVE AMMUNITION 'A' 172 T. 'B' 106 T. 'C' 245 T.
EXPLOSIVES 'A' CLASS 33 TONS 'B' CLASS 40 TONS 'C' CLASS 105 TONS
MACHINERY SPACE
LUBE OIL 214 DRUMS AIRCRAFT DOPE 20 TONS
EXPLOSIVES 58 TONS 'A'
3435 LUBE OIL DRUMS 573 TONS
EXPLOSIVES
Ⓐ 1089 LUBE OIL DRUMS 168 TONS 'A'
SCRAP IRON
11537 PIECES TIMBER
4100 COTTON BALES 769 TONS
'C' AMMUNITION 187 TONS
AMMUNITION 15 TONS 'C'
DRIED FISH LUBE OIL
13,163 PIECES TIMBER
FISH MANURE
1428 COTTON BALES 268 TONS
9000 BAGS SULPHUR 325 TONS
Ⓐ 124 BARS GOLD BULLION = 3472 lbs
1291 TONS MIXED AMMUNITION AND EXPLOSIVES

The deadweight tonnage of the Fort ships was 7,142 which permitted a cargo of 6,706 tons to be carried together with a full load of fuel. Naturally a bulky, lightweight product could fill the ship but not equal the maximum permitted load, although frequently ships were overloaded beyond their Plimsoll lines. This is the loading plan for the SS *Fort Stikine* on her last voyage, machinery space being taken up by the Dominion Engineering Works reciprocating engine and boiler.



Plan of the docks. The area affected by the subsequent fire was more than a mile across.

sion of industry required bigger docks, and the first to be completed was Princes Dock in 1880. Later, the Merewether dry dock was added to it. Within eighteen months it was obvious that the new dock's capacity was insufficient and a further dock was planned.

On March 12, 1888 the Victoria Dock was opened. It contained 25 acres of water and measured 1270ft×1000ft with a depth of 25ft. Access to the sea and Princes Dock was provided by short passages that could be closed by floating caissons. Around the perimeter were 58 mobile water-powered hydraulic cranes.

By the turn of the century larger vessels and better port facilities led to the construction of the Alexander Dock which opened in 1914. Hundreds of warehouses were built with a capacity of over 1,000,000 bales of cotton together with accommodation blocks for port labourers. Adjoining this expanding port area were the sprawling over-crowded poorer sections of the city bisected by the main railway line running north from Victoria Terminus. To enable everyone using the port to tell the time, a clock tower was erected above the Traffic Office, topped by a black ball that was hoisted and lowered at midday.

With the entry of Japan into the war in 1941, the Indian east coast ports were virtually closed to shipping, and cargoes were diverted to Karachi, Bombay and Cochin. Severe delays were experienced due to the inability of the ports to cope with congestion. In peacetime, vessels carrying explosives were prohibited from entering the docks and had to fly a red flag from the mast truck. However, Port Rule No. 88 was suspended in times of great emergency and this was the case with the *Fort Stikine*. No red flag flew from the mast as this amounted to advertising a prime target to potential saboteurs.

To make the unloading of explosives as safe as possible they were classified 'A', 'B', and 'C'. Class 'A' explosives were highly sensitive and were to be discharged directly

Collapsed buildings in the Masjid Bunder area behind Frere Road.

The SS *Jalapadma* (No. 2 on the diagrams opposite), lifted bodily out of the water by a 60-foot tidal wave, rests on the quay amidst the remains of the warehouse. The bow was later successfully cut and refloated prior to removing the remainder for scrap.

into lighters and not onto the quay. Class 'B' were to be off-loaded directly into railway wagons, and Class 'C' off-loaded and stored in warehouses prior to onward movement.

Once alongside, the unloading of the drums of oil and the highly noxious fish manure commenced. A certificate of grave urgency had been issued for the ship, but lighters did not arrive until midday the following day. Twenty-four hours after docking, no explosives had been discharged and more effort was being expended on the scrap and timber in No. 2 hold. Work continued throughout the night, and by midday on April 14 all scrap had been removed except for a three-ton piece. The gold was still

Time stands still . . . well almost. The same mooring bollard in the foreground is dated 1888. The *Fort Stikine* (No. 1) was berthed beyond the *Jalapadma* — unfortunately freighters hid the dock wall during Kevin's visit to Bombay in 1988.

welded up inside the tank and the bank refused to accept it until it was delivered ashore. However, with all the explosive in the vicinity, no gas cutting gear could be used to retrieve it.

At midday the black ball on the clock tower rose and fell and shortly afterwards the stevedores stopped for lunch. Watchmen and police maintained a constant vigil for possible sabotage and anyone smoking. In the meantime, the ship's Chief Engineer, Alexander Gow, had been granted permission to carry out repairs to the slide valve and had immobilised the main engine.

Four hundred yards away lay the SS *Fort Crevier*, a sister ship to the *Stikine*. A number of the crew on deck noticed what appeared to be wisps of smoke emanating from a ventilator next to No. 2 hold on the *Stikine*, as did crew on the SS *Iran*. However, as no word of warning had been passed, they assumed that all was under control. Unfortunately, no one aboard the *Stikine* had noticed, and it was not until the stevedores returned from lunch that smoke was observed issuing up between the hatch boards of No. 2 lower hold.

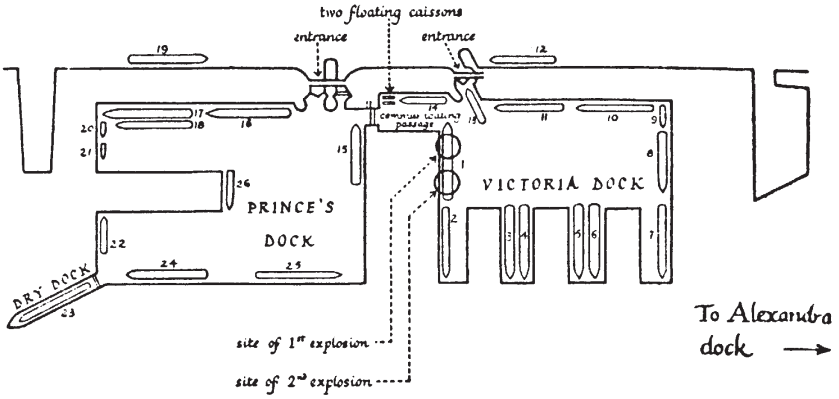
Panic ensued and stevedores and tally clerks rushed for the gangway and hampered attempts to bring fire hoses aboard from the pump on the quay. The ship's hoses were run out and water poured into the hold. Nearly two hours had passed since the smoke was first noticed by the *Fort Crevier* crew. The thickening smoke made a visual inspection impossible and water continued to be blindly poured into the hold. Captain Oberst, the British Army officer in charge of explosives in the docks area, arrived and, together with Captain Naismith and Chief Engineer Gow, examined the cargo manifest. Although they were faced with imminent disaster on a huge scale, there was a dilemma. The suggestion to scuttle the ship alongside proved impossible as the ballast and bilge pumps were fitted wth non-return valves to drain the holds but not to flood them, and in any case the water depth below the ship was insufficient to fill the lower hold. At the same time the ship could not be moved under her own power as the main engine was partly disassembled, and no tugs were immediately available to pull her clear.

Meanwhile eight more fire engines arrived alongside together with the Bombay Fire Chief, Norman Coombs.

Oberst's jurisdiction on explosives commenced when the explosives left the ship. When it was suggested that the vessel be moved out of the harbour, Chief Engineer Gow pointed out that the main engine was under repair, and Fire Chief Coombs added that the 30-plus hoses now playing water into No. 2 hold would have to be disconnected, leaving only the ship's three hoses working with the result that the ship would probably explode before reaching deep water.

Two firefighting boats, the *Doris* and *Panwell*, came alongside and added nine more hoses. With more than 800 tons of water in the lower hold, the ship began to take on a severe list to starboard. By this time, numerous people in authority had arrived, all with their own ideas on how to tackle the problem but none with overall authority to get anything done. No co-ordinated effort or meeting was undertaken, and the two men who could have authorised the removal and scuttling of the vessel, the Commodore, Royal Indian Navy, and the Naval Officer-in-Charge, Bombay, were not advised until too late.

The first indication of actual fire was when the grey wartime paint on the ship's plates began to blister and peel. Coombs' decision to cut a hole in the ship's side was frustrated by inefficient gas cutting equipment. The heat spread and the patch glowed red. Another set of cutting equipment was ordered but time was rapidly running out. By

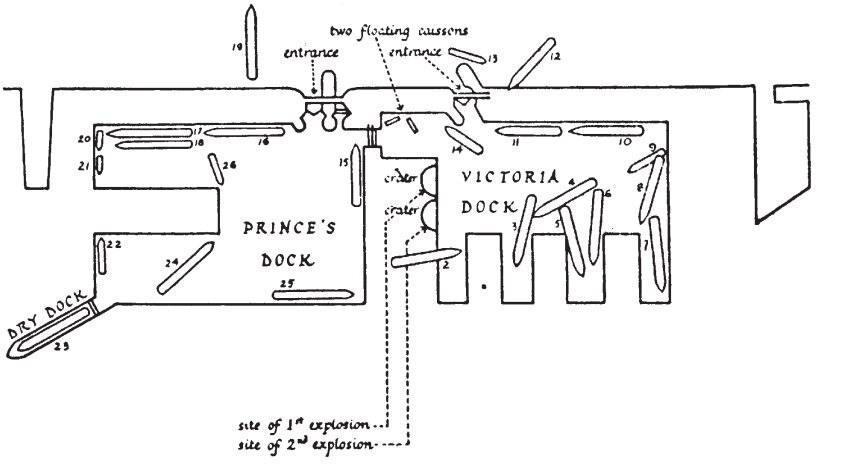


The position of the ships in the docks before the explosions

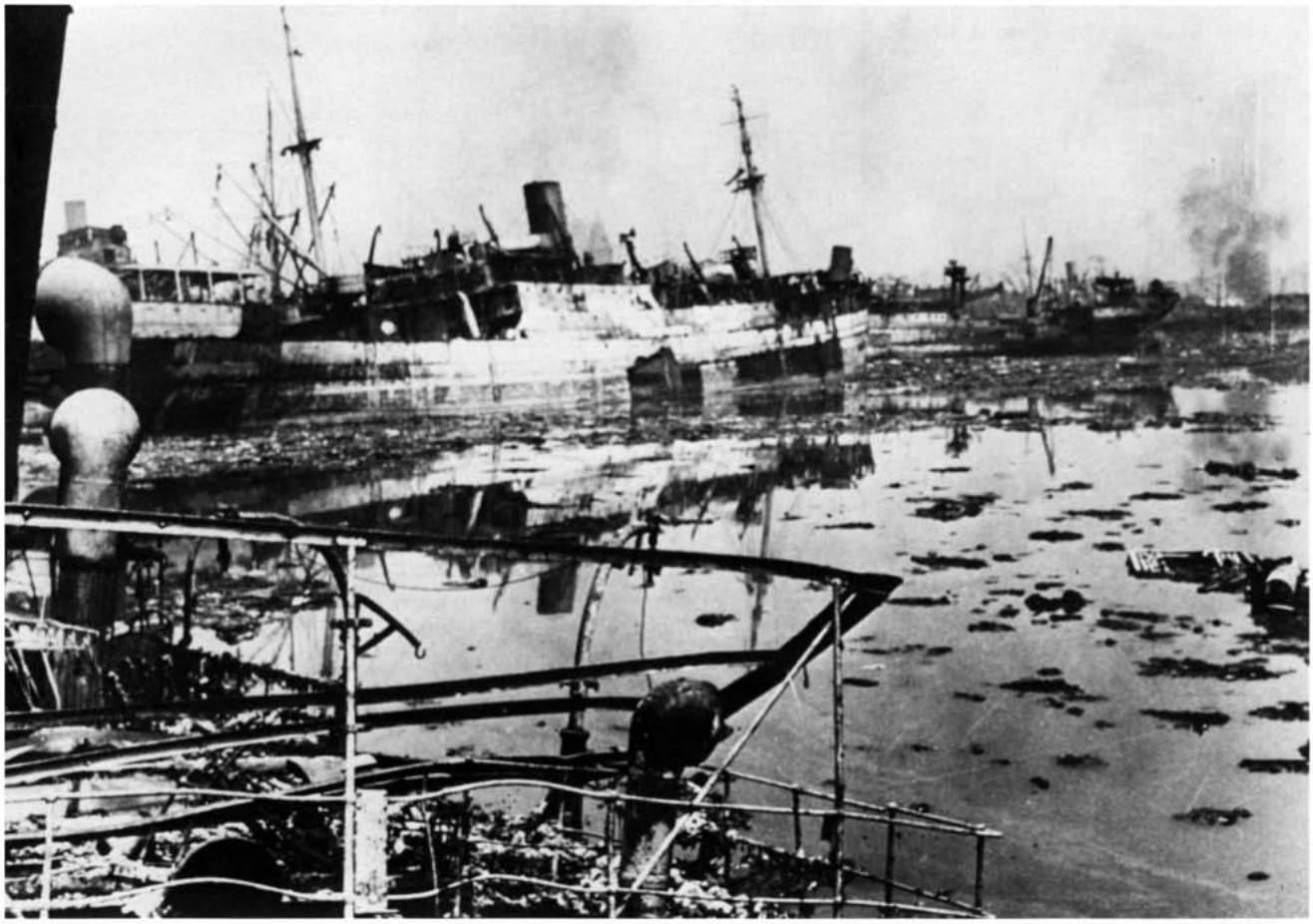
VESSELS MOORED IN VICTORIA/PRINCES DOCKS

APRIL 14, 1944

Name	*G.R.T.*	*Flag*	*Condition*
1. *FORT STIKINE*	7142	UK	TOTAL LOSS
2. *JALAPADMA*	3935	UK	TOTAL LOSS
3. *BARODA*	3205	UK	TOTAL LOSS
4. *EL HIND*	5214	UK	BURNT OUT
5. *NORSE TRADER*	3507	PANAMA	BURNT OUT
6. *JALARIJAYA*	3756	UK	BURNT OUT
7. *IRAN*	5704	PANAMA	TOTAL LOSS
8. *FORT CREVIER*	7100	UK	BURNT OUT
9. *SPOTHILL*	—	UK	SUNK
10. *ROD EL FARAG*	6842	EGYPT	TOTAL LOSS
11. *GEN. VAN DER HEIJDEN*	1213	HOLLAND	TOTAL LOSS
12. *GEN. VAN DER SWIETEN*	1300	HOLLAND	TOTAL LOSS
13. *WATER BARGE*	—	UK	TOTAL LOSS
14. *TINOMBO*	872	UK	SUNK
15. *KING YUAN*	2653	UK	SUNK
16. *BELRAY*	2888	NORWEGIAN	BURNT OUT
17. *BRAGANZA*	3935	NORWEGIAN	UNDAMAGED
18. *CADSA*	4826	UK	UNDAMAGED
19. *GRACIOSA*	1029	NORWEGIAN	TOTAL LOSS
20. *LUCKNOW*	185	UK	DAMAGED
21. *PESHAWAR*	185	UK	DAMAGED
22. *MOORHEN 1*	219	UK	UNDAMAGED
23. *BLAIRCLOVA*	2953	UK	UNDAMAGED
24. *EMPIRE INDUS*	5155	UK	BURNT OUT
25. *CHANGON*	2335	UK	BURNT OUT
26. *CHELURA* (Dredger)	—	UK	BURNT OUT



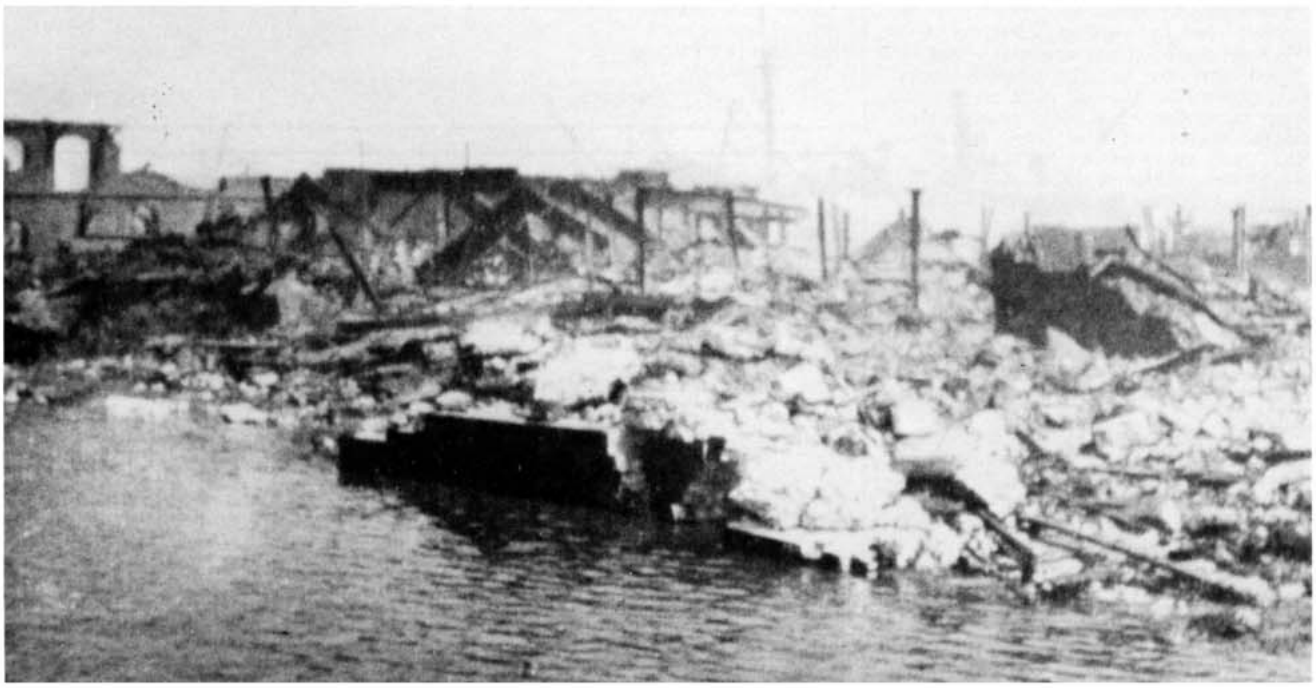
The position of the ships in the docks after the explosions



The *El Hind* (No. 4) viewed from the burned out deck of the *Rod El Farag* (No. 10). (IWM)

3.30 p.m. it was impossible to walk on the port side of the deck and water spray boiled on contact with the steel.

By this time an estimated 900 tons of water had been pumped into the hold, but with little effect, and the heat patch continued to spread until it was over ten feet in diameter. The rising water in the hold floated the burning cotton bales closer and closer to the underside of the 'tween deck until eventually the 'tween deck plates began to glow, directly under the 'A' class explosives. The fire ignited the dunnage — wood packing — and some of the explosives caught fire. Flames and dense smoke roared out of No. 2 hold. The firemen striving to hold the hoses fell back, sparks from the burning wood and cotton starting fires on the dockside. At ten minutes to four a huge column of flame shot up over the mast-head. Coombs ordered an immediate retreat, and men dropped over the side onto the quay in a tangle of bodies, others dived into the water and swam away from the ship. Captain Naismith gave the order for his crew to abandon ship and made the rounds to ensure all his seamen had left. Then, just as he and the Chief Officer were



Piles of rubble surround the two craters in the wall of Berth No. 1 following the two explosions.

The blasts rained burning debris all over the dockyard area and beyond, starting numerous fires. Here on the morning after the explosion firemen attempt to bring the burning holds of the SS *Iran* (No. 7) under control. (IWM)

walking away from the ship the second set of gas cutting equipment arrived.

By now the ship was burning fiercely, small arms ammunition was exploding continuously, with flames and black choking smoke pouring out of the hatchway. At six minutes past four the largest firework display in India's history took place when the *Fort Stikine* exploded. Drums of oil, sections of the ship, and cotton bales fell over a wide area. The *Jalapadma*, directly astern of the *Fort Stikine*, was lifted out of the water and turned through ninety degrees by a 60-foot tidal wave that left the vessel perched across the dock with the stern in a warehouse. The blast shook buildings, blew out windows, and killed people haphazardly in the surrounding streets. Captain Naismith and Chief Officer Henderson, who were by the stern, were never seen again. Above the traffic office the clock hands were blasted against the face, transfixed at six minutes past four. they remained that way for many months and the midday black ball has never moved since.

So violent had the blast been that at Simla, the hill station in the Himalayas, a thousand miles away, the meteorological equipment there recorded the tremor.

The after section of the *Fort Stikine* containing over 700 tons of explosives lay burning, buckled and twisted beside an enormous crater in the quay wall. Around the two docks four vessels had sunk under the wall of water and eleven were on fire. Sections of the ship flew far and wide, one of the two deck guns landed inside a railway wagon, the other in the middle of Frere Road, while one of the anchors ended up hanging from the mast of a vessel in Princes Dock.

The chaos that followed the explosion was escalated by the lack of organisation, and priorities in firefighting and civil defence rescue were unco-ordinated. The fires raged in a rough circle with a radius of about 900 yards from the *Fort Stikine*, and the lack of effort in firefighting within the dock area was later thought to have contributed to many of the burning vessels becoming total losses.

Thirty-four minutes after the first explosion, the burning after section of the *Fort Stikine* disappeared in a second vast explosion that sent debris, cargo and burning munitions soaring 3,000 feet into the darkened sky, raining death and destruction over an even wider area. People experienced a great rush of air followed by a vacuum that left survivors and casualties littered around the streets like rag dolls.

Many of the key figures in the Fire Department and Port Authority who had intimate knowledge of the dock area were dead, as were 60 firemen killed in the first explosion. Over 200 additional fire pumps were held by private companies throughout the city, but due to an oversight by the authorities they were to be used only in times of hostile attack. As this was not the case, they remained in store. Senior military officers paid a brief visit to the stricken area and declared the dock area was impenetrable

The dreadful scenes following the fires which overwhelmed many of the firemen and dock workers.

and best left alone to burn out. Luckily this did not happen as numerous Servicemen and volunteers made their way into the area and found survivors who required assistance.

In Girgaum Road, half a mile away, a retired Indian engineer and his family watched the pall of smoke rise over the city from his third floor flat. A loud bang outside the balcony startled them. They peered out and there lay a blackened lump of metal: a gold bar numbered 213256 valued at £6,750. After handing it to the authorities he collected the princely sum of £70 — just over one per cent of its value!

Within hours of the second explosion, emergency services were attending to the injured and the mighty task of assessing the damage and clearing the debris began. The Victoria Dock surface was completely covered by debris several feet deep, consisting of thousands of bales of cotton, timber . . . and corpses. The whole area surrounding the docks was layered in hot ash, broken masonry, distorted and melted steel, burning timber and rubber. Dense clouds of thick acrid smoke rose into the afternoon sky obscuring the sun and creating an early evening effect. The superstructure of the sunken vessels protruded above this mess while the remaining vessels afloat slowly burnt themselves out.

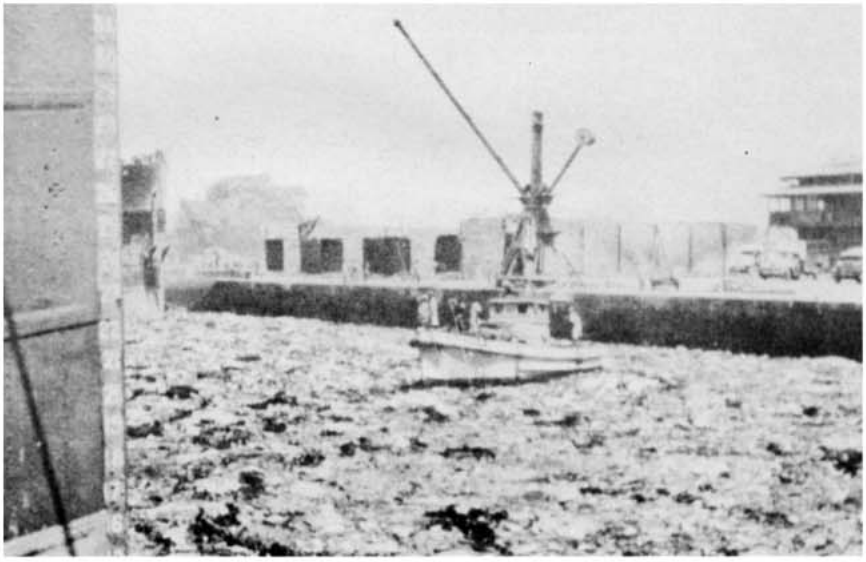
The fires blazed for a further two days, but gradually they died down or were doused by the remaining fire service vehicles not destroyed in the blast, one particular solitary Leyland fire engine doing sterling service throughout the following days.

With Allied advances into Burma requiring an ever-increasing supply of war material, the reconstruction of the dock was imperative, and before long over 8,000 men were at work clearing the debris. Many of the ships in the dock basin required extensive salvage work before they could be refloated. The 4,000-ton *Jalapadma* set a precedent in salvage history, sitting astride the warehouse with the bow partially in the water. The wreck had to be removed prior to reconstruction of the berth. Naval architects calculated that the bow would float if cut free of the remainder of the ship behind No. 1 hold. All the auxiliary equipment, mast, derricks, and deck gear, were removed and the fo'c's'le cut down to main deck level to lower the centre of gravity. The cutaway sections were stowed in the after end of No. 1 hold to act as ballast where the displacement was greatest. When the stowage was complete, the outer shell plate of the hull was cut, leaving just two decks holding the sections together. Severing the decks together with the rise and fall of the tide did the rest; the bow dropped twenty feet and floated as predicted. It was towed away and scrapped while the remainder was cut up and trucked away.

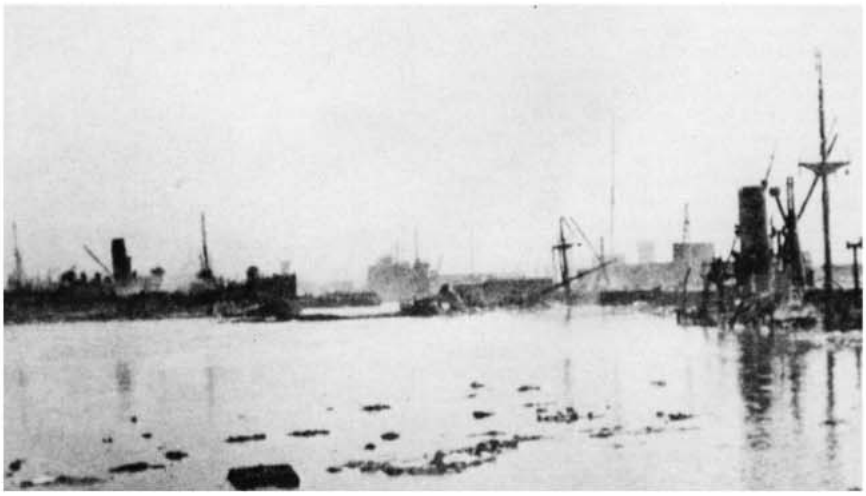
As far as the dock was concerned, it was decided to close off the two entrances using two floating caissons and pump the dock dry. Two ships were moved prior to this, the *Rod El Farag* and *Baroda*, which were then beached up the coast, Once the caissons were sunk into place, pumping commenced. Over a million tons of water had to be removed. Eleven days later, with pumps running continuously, the bottom appeared, deep black, stinking, slimy mud with the shattered remains of the *Fort Stikine* and over 15,000 tons of destroyed cargo. Embedded in this filthy ooze were motor vehicles, small boats, dockside equipment, cotton bales and miles of wire; part of the cargo of the *Fort Stikine*.

Work on excavating the two blast craters began immediately with the removal of 30,000 cubic yards of fill and 15,000 tons of rubble. This operation took six weeks. The vast hole was refilled and a new quay wall built in twenty-five days.

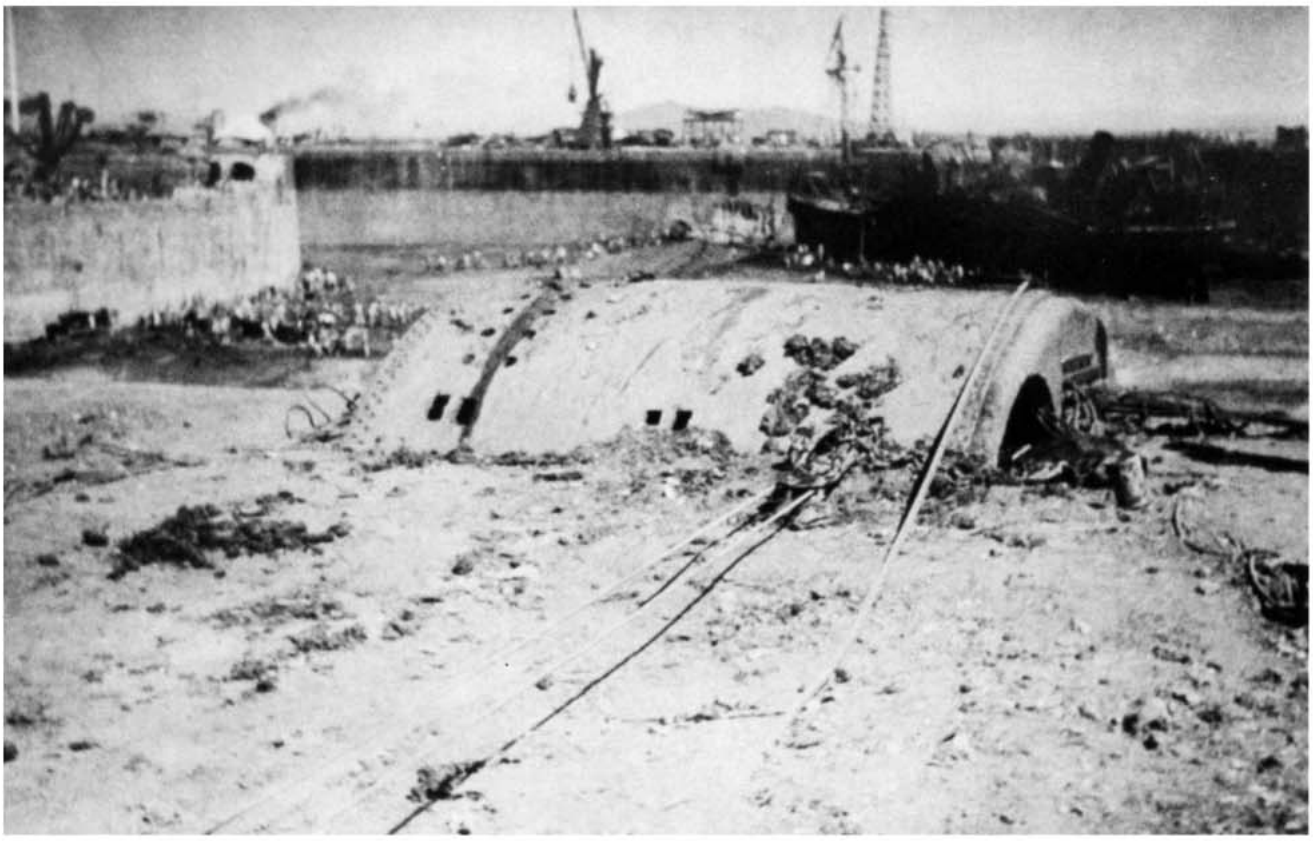
Meanwhile, the men engaged in working



The water in the dock basin was covered with thousands of tons of cotton bales. The clear up operation was enormous but at that stage of the war in the Far East, Bombay was a vital staging post and the port had to be brought back into operation as soon as humanly possible.



Some 8,000 men were set to work to clear the debris — this picture being taken looking toward Princes Dock after much of the floating rubbish had been removed. In the right foreground lies the remains of the *General van der Heijden* (No. 11) with the masts of the sunken *Tinombo* (No. 14).



Once the floating debris had been removed, the dock was sealed with two floating caissons prior to the evacuation of some 250 million gallons of filthy water and sludge. One can then imagine the conditions as labourers worked in the ooze of the dock bed to remove another 15,000 tons of rubbish. Here a boiler from the *Fort Stikine* has been set in the dock wall to prevent cables damaging the coping. Meanwhile reconstruction of Berth No. 1 continues on the left.

in the morass in the dock bottom earned the nickname 'Mud Larks'. They probed the dock bed removing wreckage with the use of bulldozers and cables running over the sections of the *Fort Stikine*'s boilers set into the quay walls to prevent damage to the coping.

The sunken motor vessel *Tinombo* also presented problems. She had sunk loaded with 400 tons of rock ballast at an angle to the quay wall. As no mechanical equipment could reach the vessel where she lay, the entire cargo had to be off-loaded by hand.

The entire cargo of the *Tinombo* (No. 14) on the right had to be off-loaded by hand — some 400 tons of rock ballast — because the awkward angle at which she rested prevented the use of cranes or other mechanical equipment. Wreckage from the remains of the *Fort Stikine* lies alongside having been hauled across the dock bed.

The Governor, Sir Henry Colville, accompanied by military advisers, inspects the reconstruction work.

Forty-four years later Mr S. Rangel, Assistant Docks Manager of the Bombay Port Trust, stands in with a security guard.

Berth No. 1, where the *Fort Stikine* exploded, being rebuilt — a job which was completed in only 25 days. The light railway on the dock bed served to remove debris. (The Times of India)

The sunken vessels and those with severe damage to hulls were made watertight in what was now effectively a dry dock, in preparation for its re-flooding, once the dock had been cleared of debris and the quay walls repaired. On October 28, six-and-a-half months after the disaster, water was admitted through the caisson sluice gates and two days later the dock was filled and all the vessels afloat once more. The devastated area around the docks had been cleared and an estimated 800,000 tons of debris lay in four dumps that extended along the roadside for two miles.

The media coverage was heavily censored. *The Times of India* mentioned it under the heading of 'Explosives cause fires in Bombay', the report which followed being almost cryptic in its contents. A newsreel cameraman who covered the firefighting and rescue work had his film confiscated by the military

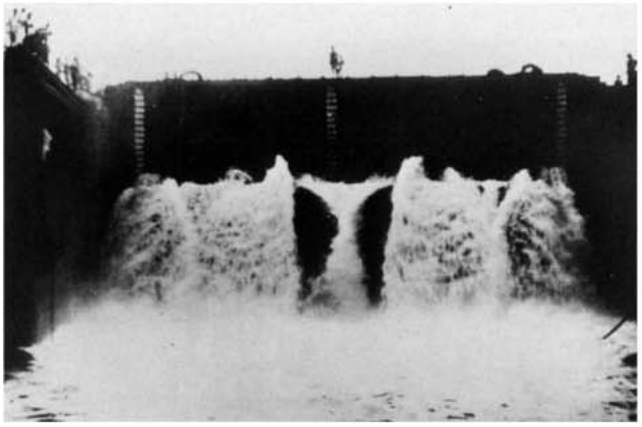
The repair to the dock wall which can be seen on the left is almost complete. In the background lies the wreck of the *Tinombo*. (IWM)

authorities. A severely edited version showing running crowds and palls of smoke was shown in Bombay under the bland title of 'Fire havoc in Bombay' in the hope of quelling rumours of enemy air raids or sabotage.

The number that perished will never be known; official figures show 233 killed, 476 injured, but a truer estimate would be closer to 1,400.

In the weeks following the explosion, black marketeers had a field day in trading in commodities in short supply after an estimated 4,000 tons of foodstuffs were destroyed. Warehouse space was at a premium with rentals exceeding ten times normal rates.

On May 8, 1944, a Commission of Enquiry was held under Sir Leonard Stone, OBE, Chief Justice of the High Court at Bombay. The session, held *in camera*, listed five primary causes of the disaster:



1. The existence of a state of war, resulting in the practice of bringing into the docks ships laden with explosives and ammunition.

2. The cargo stowage of the *Fort Stikine* at Karachi in such a way that cotton was stowed above and below explosives and ammunition.

3. Accidental ignition of the cotton in No. 2 lower hold.

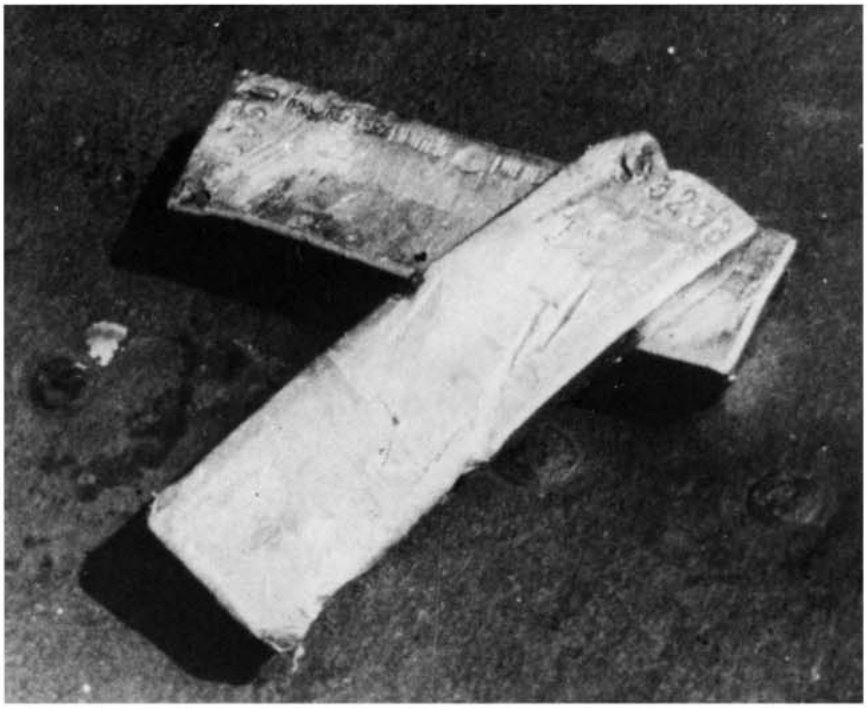
4. Failure at the outset of the fire by those in authority present to appreciate the gravity of the situation and, during the course of the fire, the failure by those then present in authority to take energetic steps either to extinguish the fire or to take alternative action to avert the disaster.

5. The absence at the fire of a centralised executive control with power to issue paramount orders and co-ordinate the various authorities and services concerned.

The exact cause of the fire will never be known but it was attributed to a cigarette carelessly dropped by a stevedore while illicitly smoking in the lower half of No. 2 hold into which he could have descended via the mast house access shaft ladder.

As for the remaining 123 bars of gold, two were recovered after the war during dredging operations in the dock area, but the remainder were never found. They may well have been scattered to the winds or possibly found and sold into the Indian gold market, or may even still lie buried in the bottom of the harbour — no one will ever be sure.

Left: **Work was completed by October 28 when water was introduced through the caisson sluice gates during the reflooding operation. (IWM)** *Right:* **Today the sluice gate lies unused in the corner of the dock. Behind it is the Port Office with its stationary time ball which has not worked since the day of the explosion.**



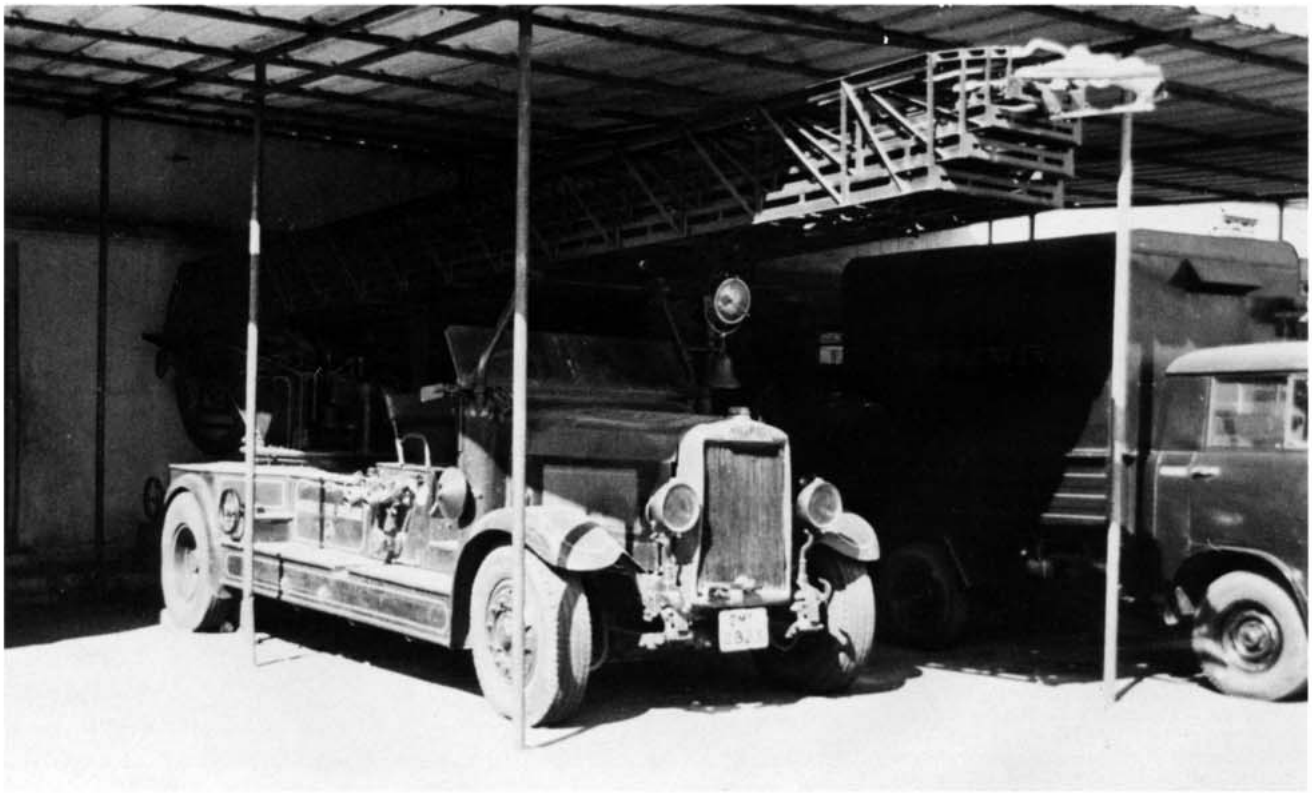
Nice find during dredging operations in 1946 — two of the gold bars — but there are over 100 still missing!

A service is held at the Byculla Memorial every April 14 to remember those who died and who are commemorated on the Roll of Honour.

Near to the Victoria Dock basin stands a black stone monument within the centre of a traffic roundabout. At the base a bronze plaque states: 'In memory of those who lost their lives in the Dock explosion — April 14th, 1944', and on either side marble plaques record the names.

Behind the monument stands the traffic office whose midday time ball has never moved since. A small office building nearby has a painted safety warning: 'Lest we forget 1944'.

At Byculla Fire Station, headquarters of the Bombay Fire Brigade, a granite monument stands in a small grassed area, and mounted on the wall of the duty office is the Roll of Honour that records the names of those who died fighting the fire aboard the Fort Stikine. In the shade of an outside shelter is the 1930s-vintage Leyland fire engine: the sole survivor of the vehicles that took part, and now preserved after its withdrawal from service in 1980.



A solitary surviving relic of the Battle of Bombay Dock — a 1936 Leyland fire engine was preserved at Byculla Fire Station.

THE BATTLE OF DEN BOSCH

BY KAREL MARGRY

OPERATION ALAN

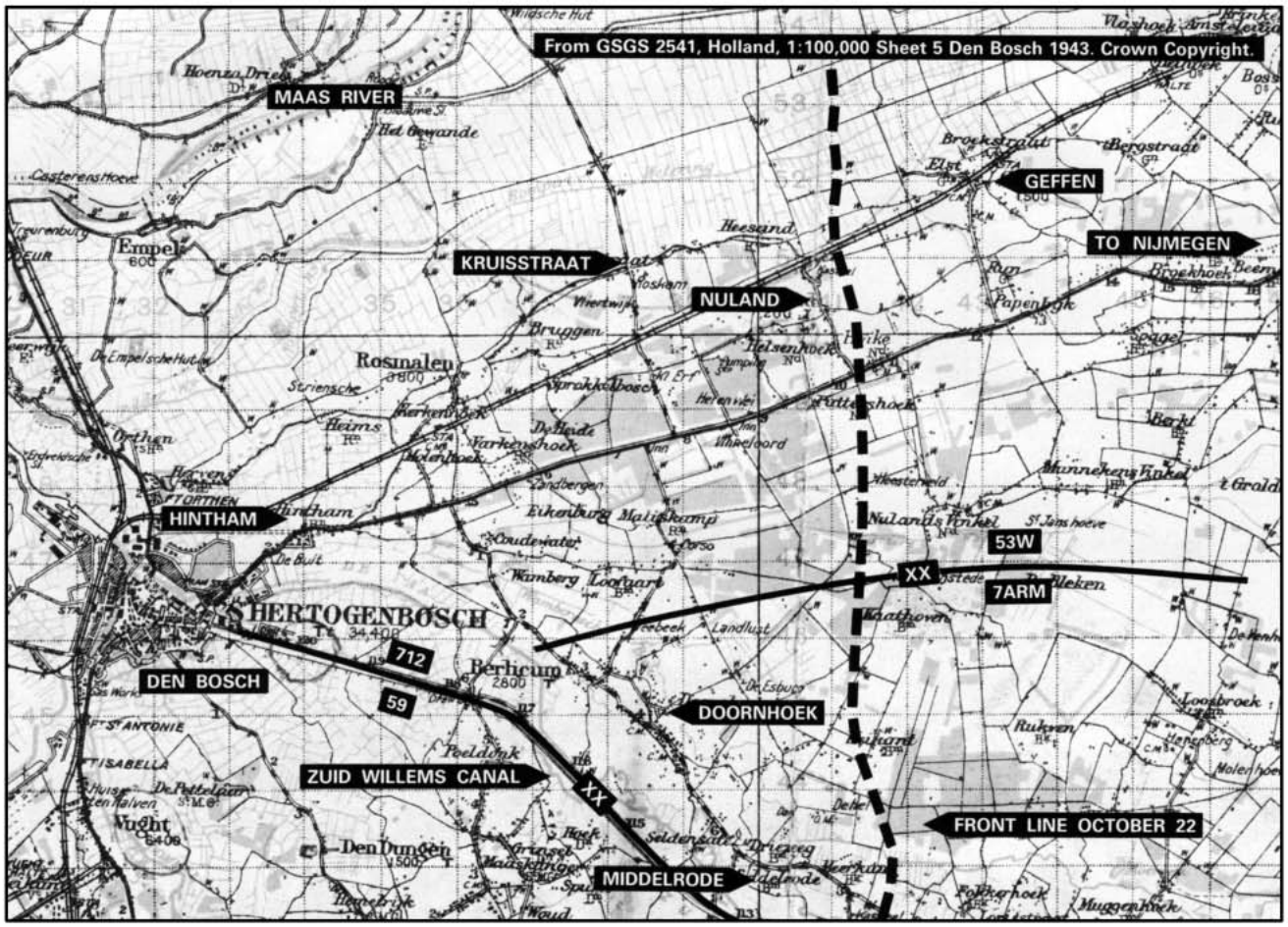
In late September 1944, after the failure at Arnhem, the Allied armies under General Eisenhower faced serious logistical problems. To solve them, they needed to open the port of Antwerp, lying in Field-Marshal Montgomery's 21 Army Group area of operations. On October 16, Montgomery issued orders making Antwerp the sole priority for 21 Army Group and switching the British Second Army (Lieutenant-General Sir Miles Dempsey) westwards.

Second Army was to employ its 'whole available offensive power . . . in a strong thrust westwards on the general axis 's-Hertogenbosch–Breda, with the right flank on the Meuse [Maas] . . . thus cutting the communication routes of all enemy troops south of that river.'

The attack that was to clear the Germans from the area south of the Maas was launched by the Canadian First Army's I (British) Corps which attacked northwards from the Antwerp area on October 20 and by the Second Army's XII Corps (Lieutenant-General N. M. Ritchie) which thrust westwards from the salient, created by the Arnhem operation, on October 22. That thrust was made with three divisions abreast: from north to south: the 53 (Welsh) Division, directed on 's-Hertogenbosch; the 51 (Highland) Division, objective Boxtel; and the 15 (Scottish) Division, directed on Tilburg. The 7th Armoured Division, after an initial rôle in support of the assault on 's-Hertogenbosch, was to be ready to exploit westwards, passing through the 51 Division. The combined offensive was given the codename Operation Pheasant, but the assault on 's-Hertogenbosch received one of its own: Operation Alan.

's-Hertogenbosch (or, as the Dutch say, Den Bosch) was founded in 1185 at a confluence of two rivers. Owing to its strategic position it had seen many battles and sieges and, consequently, had developed into a typical fortress town with ramparts, moats and a citadel. Even by 20th century standards, these defensive works were still formidable obstacles. The town dominated the land surrounding it. An important administrative, industrial and communications centre, it had in 1944 a population of about 50,000. In early October, when the front lines stabilised, the British in the salient were still eight miles east of 's-Hertogenbosch. The terrain over which the battle was to be fought is typical Dutch lowland: mostly flat, water-logged and criss-crossed by numerous dikes and ditches.

Top: **Sherman of the East Riding Yeomanry entering 's-Hertogenbosch in central southern Netherlands on October 25, 1944.** *Above:* **The same spot today where Graafseweg enters the town. (The 's' prefix is a modern abbreviation for the old Dutch 'Des', but today, 's-Hertogenbosch — The Duke's Wood — is more often referred to as simply 'The Wood': Den Bosch.)**



When the 53 Division began arriving in the sector, around October 19, the front was held by 7 Armoured Division, which had arrived here at the end of September. Since then, the front had been static, with little activity except patrolling and occasional shelling of church tower observation posts. Each morning for three weeks, the Desert Rats had sent small tank patrols into no-man's land between Geffen and Nuland and the Germans had grown accustomed to the sound of enemy armour at dawn. Care was taken to continue this routine and to conceal the arrival of the new division.

Commanded by Major-General Bobby Ross, the 53rd had fought in Normandy and on the Dutch border. So far, most of its battles had been brigade actions and this would be the first operation for which the division as a whole had been given a clear-cut task of its own: the capture of Den Bosch.

For this, it was assigned considerable support in tanks (two battalions from 7 Armoured) and specialised armour: flame-throwing Crocodiles, mine-clearing Flails, AVRE assault tanks and Kangaroo armoured personnel carriers. The flame-throwers of C Squadron, 141 Royal Armoured Corps (the Buffs), in particular, were to play a decisive rôle in the coming battle.

The plan of attack was simple but imaginative. The division would attack with two brigades up: 160 Brigade north, astride the Nijmegen-Den Bosch railway line; and 71 Brigade south, astride the main Nijmegen-Den Bosch road. The third, 158 Brigade, would be in reserve, but one battalion, 1 East Lancs, was to be ready in Kangaroos for a powerful armoured thrust, later in the day, right through to Den Bosch. This spearhead would be launched through 160 Brigade, but only when the divisional commander deemed it opportune. If all went well, Den Bosch would thus be reached on the very first day.

Above: **Geffen was 160 Brigade's jump-off point for Operation Alan. On the morning of the attack, Captain Malindine photographed these men, most probably from 4 Welch, moving through the village. Note the church tower damaged by German shellfire. (IWM)** *Below:* **Now nothing in Geffen reminds one of the events of 1944.**

Above: **Generalleutnant Friedrich Neumann, commander of 712. Infanterie Division. (Bundesarchiv)** *Right:* **Major Riedel, the last Kampfkommandant of Den Bosch looking rather dejected after his capture by 6 Royal Welch Fusiliers. (IWM)**

In 1984, our author Karel Margry, together with Luc van Gent, made a film documentary on the battle for Den Bosch for which they interviewed numerous participants on location. Thus it was that 40 years after they collectively assaulted Nuland, Arthur Lewis (left), in 1944 commanding D Company of 4 Welch, and Andrew Wilson (right), then leading the flamethrowers of No. 14 Troop, 141 RAC, met again on the start-line of the offensive, just west of Geffen. Their objective, Nuland, is visible in the far distance. (R. van Gent)

THE GERMANS AT DEN BOSCH

The Netherlands south of the Maas were defended by Generaloberst Gustav von Zangen's 15. Armee. Opposing the British XII Corps was his LXXXVIII. Korps, under General Hans Reinhard, with three divisions and a fourth on the way. Von Zangen was well aware of the importance of Den Bosch. Most of his supply lines ran through it. If Den Bosch fell, his position south of the Maas would become untenable. Therefore, he had ordered Reinhard to specifically assign one division to its defence. This was the 712. Infanterie-Division, commanded by the able Generalleutnant Friedrich Neumann.

A static division, it had seen heavy fighting in Belgium, trying to stem the Allied advance on Antwerp. It had reached Den Bosch on September 26 and bloodied its nose in an attack on the Arnhem corridor near Oss. In these battles, Neumann's two infantry regiments had been very much depleted: one battalion of Grenadier-Regiment 732 had been destroyed and two from Grenadier-Regiment 745.

When he arrived in Den Bosch, Neumann found a Kampfkommandant already in command there. This was Oberst Dewald, an elderly parachute colonel, commanding a parachute training unit of three battalions. These he soon put at Neumann's disposal. From corps reserve, Neumann received another training unit, Feld-Ersatz-Bataillon 347, commanded by a Major Stendhal. Although insufficiently trained and armed, these units at least made up for some of his losses in manpower.

When given the task of holding Den Bosch, Neumann ordered his men to dig in. Two parallel defence lines were constructed. Manning them, from north to south, were: Regiment 745, from the Maas to the village of Nuland; Regiment 732, astride and south of the main road; and Kampfgruppe Bieg, an improvised regiment under Oberst Karl Bieg, made up of Parachute Battalion Hanke and Bataillon Stendhal, from Doornhoek to the canal.

Neumann had no armour. But he was fortunate in that his division was still relatively strong in artillery: he had 30 guns, 11 of them anti-tank.

THE FIRST TWO DAYS

At 2.30 a.m. on October 22, XII Corps artillery opened up a formidable three-hour bombardment. Six field, two medium and one-and-a-half heavy regiments — a total of some 200 guns — put down heavy concentrations on all known enemy localities. H-Hour was 6.30 a.m.

160 Brigade (Brigadier C. F. C. Coleman) attacked with one battalion on each side of the railway embankment, 2 Monmouthshire Regiment on the right and 4 Welch Regiment (with the Crocodiles) on the left. Each was supported by a squadron of 5 Royal Inniskilling Dragoon Guards.

2 Monmouthshire Regiment (Lieutenant-Colonel F. H. Brooke), with A Squadron, had a dike road as its axis. The Mons attacked vigorously, fighting their way through I. Bataillon of Regiment 745. By 12.30 p.m. they had reached the hamlet of Kruisstraat.

Meanwhile, 4 Welch (Lieutenant-Colonel J. M. K. Spurling), on the other side of the railway, assaulted Nuland. To get there, they had to advance across 1,500 yards of open field. Nuland itself was masked by a 15-foot embankment, covered in trees, running the entire length of the village and presenting a difficult tank obstacle. Holding it was Fusilier-Bataillon 712, in the best shape of all 712. Division's units. Of the six Crocodiles used in the attack, three reached the embankment just as the artillery barrage lifted and well in advance of the infantry. Working down the line of trees, they methodically flamed the German positions, Lieutenant Andrew Wilson knocking out a well-camouflaged 37mm gun which had fired at a supporting Cromwell. By then, the infantry had caught up with the tanks and they went in, through the flames, with fixed bayonets.

Few of the survivors in the forward positions chose to make a fight of it. By 7.45 a.m. Nuland was reported clear. Some 50 prisoners had been taken, among them Hauptmann Siebecker, the German battalion commander. The Welch had one man killed and three wounded.

The battalion now entered the woods west of Nuland, using Wasps to flame out pockets of Germans. Slowly, Regiment 745 began to give ground. More and more Germans surrendered. Even the regimental commander, Oberst Wüst, and his staff were cornered in the woods and taken prisoner.

In the afternoon of October 22, the Ox & Bucks move down the main road to Den Bosch to join 71 Brigade's attack, photographed by Captain Malindine near the crossroads south of Geffen. (IWM)

But all this was taking up a lot of time and, by midday, 4 Welch were falling well behind 2 Mons on their right. This was serious as the divisional plan depended on them coming abreast of Kruisstraat before 1.00 p.m.

On the left of 160 Brigade, 71 Brigade (Brigadier M. Elrington) had also started at H-Hour. Here, the assault troops, 1 Highland Light Infantry (Lieutenant-Colonel T. Macleod) on the right and 4 Royal Welch Fusiliers (Lieutenant-Colonel H. J. Tedder) on the left, entered the woods almost immediately after jump-off. Opposing them was Regiment 732, with I. Bataillon entrenched along the edge of the woods and III. Bataillon further back. Fighting in these woods proved very difficult and costly.

At mid-morning, Elrington, slightly worried, committed his reserve battalion, 1 Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry (Lieutenant-Colonel J. H. Hare). But progress remained slow and 71 Brigade's advance in these first hours was for the most part behind that of 160 Brigade.

These were confusing hours for Neumann at his command post at Hinthamerpark, an eastern suburb of Den Bosch. But he soon realised the real danger was on his left flank, at Nuland. All incoming reports from Regiment 745 indicated that the main line of defence there had been broken wide open. To strengthen the secondary line behind, Neumann, in the middle of the morning committed the troops of his Divisional Battle School and ordered his only reserve, Fallschirmjäger Bataillon Ewald, to hurry forward from Den Bosch. Soon after, the telephone lines to both Regiment 732 and Regiment 745 went dead.

Meanwhile, at 53 Divisional HQ, Ross followed the battle with rising concern. As originally planned, the launching of the armoured spearhead to Den Bosch depended on 160 Brigade reaching a 'phase line' through Kruisstraat. Its route would be south of the railway, passing through 4 Welch. The assault order (codeword 'Saucepan') would be given no later than 1.00 p.m.

However, as the time limit approached, 4 Welch, struggling through the woods, had still not reached the phase line, whereas 2 Mons, north of the railway, had. Inevitably, Ross faced the decision whether to switch the entire armoured column to the north, where the route was much poorer, or to wait in the hope that 4 Welch would still secure its objective, although this could dangerously reduce the daylight hours left. The choice was a difficult one and in the end, arguably, Ross waited too long. At a midday conference the route was changed to the north. But the 'Saucepan' signal was not given out to 158 Brigade until 2.00 p.m., late enough for the whole operation to have been called off. The assault force now had less than four hours left to complete its mission.

In order of march, it consisted of: A Squadron of 53 Reconnaissance Regiment, B Squadron of 5 Dragoon Guards, a detachment of five Flails, 1 East Lancs (Lieutenant-Colonel G.W.P.N. Burden) and a section of 202 Field Ambulance in 39 Kangaroos, a troop each from 340 SP Battery (M10s), 278 Anti-Tank Battery (17-pounders) and 222 Assault Squadron RE (AVREs), the East Lancs' own vehicles and, finally, the Wasp sections of 158 Brigade's two other battalions — a total of 111 vehicles!

The narrow and embanked dike road, with its many twists and turns, quickly slackened the pace. What should have been a lightning advance, turned into a huge traffic jam. So much time was lost that it was 3.00 p.m. before the reconnaissance regiment, in the lead, linked up with 2 Mons in Kruisstraat. The column had yet to enter enemy-held territory.

Holding that part of the secondary line was Fallschirmjäger Bataillon Wittstock. On its own in the morning, around noon the reinforcements sent by Neumann had arrived and taken up position on either side. A small minefield had been laid too.

The first recce vehicle to pass Kruisstraat crossroads was immediately fired at and hit by a Panzerfaust. Behind it, the whole struggling column came to a stop. Another tank that left the road was blown up on a mine. As the Flails were called forward to deal with the mines, D Company of the East Lancs were ordered to debus from their Kangaroos and cover the flailing operation on foot. To their surpise, they drove back the enemy some 1,000 yards with relative ease. Soon after, the Flails breached the minefield.

158 Brigade had punched a hole in the German line, but it was too late. Already, the light was failing and all surprise had clearly been lost. The attempt to reach Den Bosch on the first day had failed at Kruisstraat, five miles from the objective.

That evening, General Neumann faced a grave situation. The enemy offensive had truly overwhelmed his division. Late that night, he radioed LXXXVIII. Korps for reinforcements and General Reinhard sent him all he could spare from other units: a battalion of infantry and five towed anti-tank guns from the newly-arriving 256. Volksgrenadier-Division; two howitzer batteries from 59. Division and one from Kampfgruppe Chill. With the infantry, I. Bataillon of Regiment 481, Neumann hoped to counter-attack in the morning and plug the hole in the line.

After the breakthrough attempt had failed, General Ross saw no real alternative but to continue the first day's tactic of simply barging a way through, at least as far as Rosmalen. But Ross was thinking ahead. It had become clear that the main enemy force, Regiment 732 and the remnants of Regiment 745, were now in the woods astride the main road, confronting 71 Brigade. He did not want this force to withdraw into Den Bosch. If Coleman's 160 Brigade could get clear of the woods before that, it could, by attacking south from Rosmalen, cut the main road behind the enemy and surround him. In the meantime, these Germans would have to be kept busy by Elrington's 71 Brigade. So, while ordering Elrington to keep up the attack on his front, Ross made it clear to him that he was not to exert too much pressure, lest the enemy withdraw prematurely.

October 23 was another day of hard, bloody fighting. On 160 Brigade's front, the Monmouths used the Crocodiles to flame the enemy out of Bruggen, a hamlet on the dike road, then made steady progress to Rosmalen. The 4 Welch, on their left, meanwhile worked their way through the last woods. All along the brigade's front, the Germans were on the run.

Today the N-50 from Nijmegen to Den Bosch is a four-lane highway. The same house on the right remains the reference point.

A gunner and two horses lie dead among the debris of an artillery column of 712. Division caught in a British bombardment. The gun is a 7.5cm leichte Infanterie-Geschütz mountain pack howitzer, an odd gun for an ordinary infantry division. (IWM)

For Neumann, it was another nightmare morning. The attack to recapture Kruisstraat had come to nothing. The fresh battalion from Regiment 481 was still forming up when it was decimated by a sudden artillery barrage. The enemy attack that followed had wiped it out for good. To add to the disaster, Bataillon Wittstock had, without orders, evacuated Rosmalen and moved north into the Maas polder.

Then, at 12.45 p.m., corps radioed that nine self-propelled assault guns were on the way to his division. They were from 2. Kompanie, Panzerjäger-Abteilung 256 (again taken from 256. Division), equipped with StuG IIIs. Neumann felt elated. For the first time, he too would have armour. The attack did not get under way until 4.00 p.m. The StuGs, loaded with all available infantry, soon bumped into 4 Welch at Rosmalen. Five of them were knocked out. The rest were barely able to escape back to Hintham. Neumann's elation had been shortlived. He knew he had lost his last chance to stem the tide before the gates of the city.

As planned, 71 Brigade did not push on strongly on the 23rd. Both 4 RWF and 1 HLI spent the day keeping Regiment 732 fully occupied at Maleskamp. The only unit to move aggressively was the Ox & Bucks, protecting 160 Brigade's flank. By last light, they had come clear of the woods and reached Heer en Beek, a hamlet on the main road. By then, the German main force had started a wholesale retreat.

It took Karel quite a time to establish that Sergeant Gee had taken this picture along Oude Baan (today Waterleidingstraat), the minor road leading through the woods from Nuland to Rosmalen.

The railway embankment along which 1 East Lancs and 1/5 Welch made their daring march right through enemy lines to Den Bosch on the night of October 23-24. Troops in this picture, taken by Sergeant Carpenter next morning, are from 4 Welch who held the start-line for the night attack. The train visible in the distance, in front of Rosmalen Station, is a German hospital train that had stood unmoved since early September, after having been damaged by Allied strafing. (IWM)

THE NIGHT ASSAULT

The moment had come for a plan that Ross and his staff had been preparing since the Kangaroo attack had failed. They hoped to do two things simultaneously: to execute the planned encirclement of 712. Division and to make a surprise entry into Den Bosch. To accomplish the first, 6 Royal Welch Fusiliers, of 160 Brigade, were to cut the main road at Hintham, behind the Germans; for the second, 1 East Lancs and 1/5 Welch Regiment, of 158 Brigade, were to make a night march along the line of the railway and enter the town, as it were, through the side door. Next morning, 7 Royal Welch Fusiliers, also of 158 Brigade, were to force another entry by attacking along the main road from Hintham which, it was hoped, would then be firmly held by 6 RWF.

Both operations were thoroughly planned. Air photographs were issued to all company commanders to plan their route of march. Searchlights would produce artificial moonlight to illuminate the battlefield. A comprehensive artillery programme was set up, involving some 200 guns.

Unhappily, a few minutes before he was to instruct his unit commanders, Brigadier G. B. Sugden of 158 Brigade fell ill and had to be evacuated. Elrington from 71 Brigade took over and he led the brigade for the next two days.

The night of October 23/24 was one full of strange spectacle and sounds, giving it an eerie atmosphere of Dantesque proportions. The searchlights, the numerous fires burning, the exploding shells, all combined to put the battlefield in a half-light glow, intensely illuminated at places, suddenly lit up at others.

The 6 Royal Welch Fusiliers (Lieutenant-Colonel K. G. Exham) attacked first, at 6.30 p.m. By 10.00 p.m., A Company had reached Hintham and dug in. But as more and more German troops, on their way to the rear, came into the village and found their only escape route blocked, a violent battle erupted. Soon, the small force was flooded by enemy troops trying to keep open the road or fight their way out. In effect, the company was cut off. The other companies were unable to help. B Company had stumbled on an unexpected German strongpoint just short of the village and could not get past; C and D Companies had both occupied their assigned crossroads, but, as groups of Germans tried everywhere for a way out of the trap, they had come under attack too. In short, the bid to put the Germans in the bag had all the signs of having turned against the attacking force.

But General Neumann, in nearby Hinthamerpark, was unable to capitalise on this. He had lost control of his division. The divisional gun area was being overrun. Communications had broken down completely.

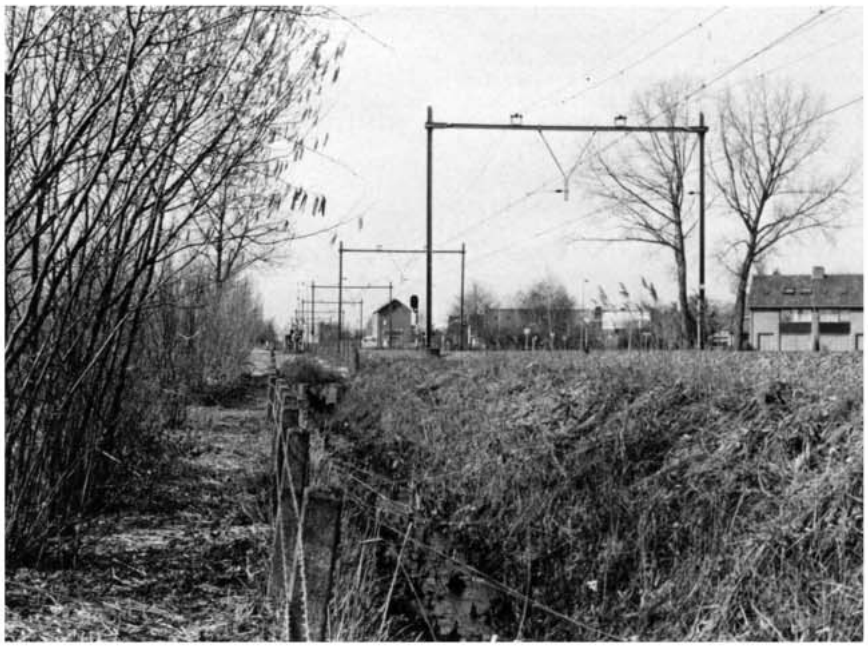
Neumann and his staff, locked in their bunkers, could do nothing but count the shells exploding above their heads. That night, over 50,000 shells completely destroyed the residential houses of Hinthamerpark. The civilians, fleeing their burning homes and looking for shelter, were admitted inside the bunkers which were soon overcrowded with men, women and children — praying, crying or not uttering a word. The barrage lasted all night, an inferno of fire, steel and smoke. At 6.15 a.m., the general and his staff, protected by troops of the Nachrichten-Abteilung, withdrew, on foot, to Den Bosch, amidst the chaos and confusion of the night.

Meanwhile, the second part of 53 Division's plan had started: the surprise attack along the railway line. The terrain being absolutely impassable for vehicles, the attack could only be made on foot. Literally everything had to be carried by hand: extra ammunition, Piats, mortars, even the heavy 22 Set (on a stretcher). No anti-tank guns or carriers could go with the infantry. Vital as they were, they were to follow in the morning by any route that could be found.

At 2.30 a.m. the East Lancs moved out, followed an hour later by 1/5 Welch. They moved through the enemy lines almost in single file.

The going was extremely tough. The men had to scramble through numerous wire fences and wade through ditches four feet deep. Everybody got soaked to the skin and were completely exhausted. Only the leading troops had a few brushes with Germans dug in along the railway.

At 4.35 a.m. the East Lancs reached the first houses of Den Bosch and immediately took up a box-like defence. Half an hour later, 1/5 Welch arrived, passed through them and continued into town. The attack had achieved complete surprise. It was still dark.



Although Rosmalen has a new station further east, and trains no longer stop at this one, the old railway building still stands as a link with the past.

Den Bosch with its triangle of waterways and many bridges. (Crown Copyright)

THE FIGHT FOR THE DIEZE BRIDGE

Den Bosch is a town divided by three waterways. The Zuid Willems Canal and the Aa, both running north-west through it, separate the northern suburbs from the town centre. The Dommel river, coming up from the south, cuts the western part off from the centre. The centre itself also has an old moat on its south side and thus resembles a large triangle, enclosed by water on all sides, the inside of which can only be reached by one of the town's 13 bridges.

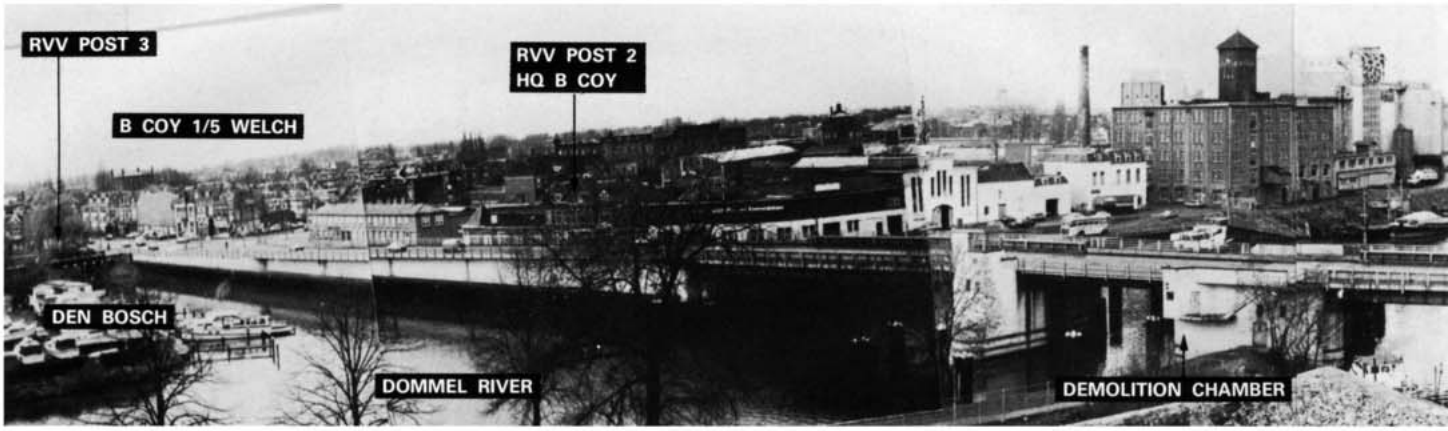
The biggest bridge of all was above the apex of the triangle. Here, the canal and the rivers all join in one broad river, the Dieze, which flows north to the Maas. The Dieze bridge, a steel and concrete structure with two long ramps, altogether over 300 yards long, connects the northern suburb with the western part of the town. It also carries the main north-south road through Den Bosch. The bridge was not just a means to enter the town, it was also part of the German lifeline to the north. It was to this bridge that 1/5 Welch now advanced. But, as they hurried through the dark streets, they were unaware that, at the bridge, a Dutch Resistance group had been awaiting their arrival for weeks.

The importance of the Dieze bridge had long been obvious to the Den Bosch Underground. In late September the local commander of the Resistance organisation Raad van Verzet (RVV), Carel van der Donck, had decided that his group would try to save it for the British when they approached.

Recently, van der Donck had taken into his group three Russians, deserters from one of the Wehrmacht's Ost-Bataillone. They had arrived complete with German uniforms and brought in rifles, grenades and even a machine gun with 2,000 rounds.

Van der Donck worked out a plan in which he set up three posts, one north of the bridge and two south of it. The northern post was in a house one block away from the bridge. The three men there had the prime task: when the British approached and the Germans were preparing to blow the bridge, they were to go out in German uniforms, surprise the sentries and the NCO responsible for bringing the bridge down, and deal with the fuses. The teams on the south bank, two men with the machine gun in a house next to the ramp and three men in a hotel overlooking the far end of it, were to hold off the garrison troops.

By the beginning of October, all three posts had been secretly established. For three weeks the Resistance men waited, keeping a constant watch, expecting the British to advance on the town any day. Unfortunately, during that time, van der Donck fell ill and could not participate any more. One result was that he could not get word of their planned action to Allied intelligence. Operation Alan was planned without them. In fact, no one in 53 Division so much as knew of their existence.



When 1/5 Welch entered the town, Lieutenant-Colonel H. D. Nelson, the battalion commander, ordered Captain David Morgan of B Company to push on and seize the bridge over the Dieze. Morgan set off at great speed, his men at times almost doubling. On the way, they kept coming upon Germans. Three times, they had to open fire, killing or scattering the enemy. Somewhere, Morgan's leading platoon went astray and he did not see it again. Near the bridge, he ran into an entire convoy of German ambulances and hospital trucks. (This was Sanitätskompanie 712, Neumann's divisional field ambulance.) Morgan did not lose time with it, knowing it would soon be captured by others. Finally, his now leading platoon reached the bridge and, in the growing light, saw it was unguarded. They crossed it without being fired at and dug in on the small roundabout at the far end. Soon after, Morgan joined them with the remaining platoon. His lance-corporal cut every demolition wire to be seen. At 6.30 a.m. Morgan radioed his CO that the bridge had been taken.

In all this, the Dutch resistance men played no part. Everything had happened so quickly that they were taken completely by surprise. When the Welshmen arrived, the two youngsters with the machine gun, Christ Nuyten and Chrèt Jamin, came out of the house that overlooked the ramp and reported to Morgan. He gratefully took over the gun and made the house his company HQ. The three from the hotel did not show up. They were pinned down by small arms fire from the Welshmen who thought the hotel was German-held.

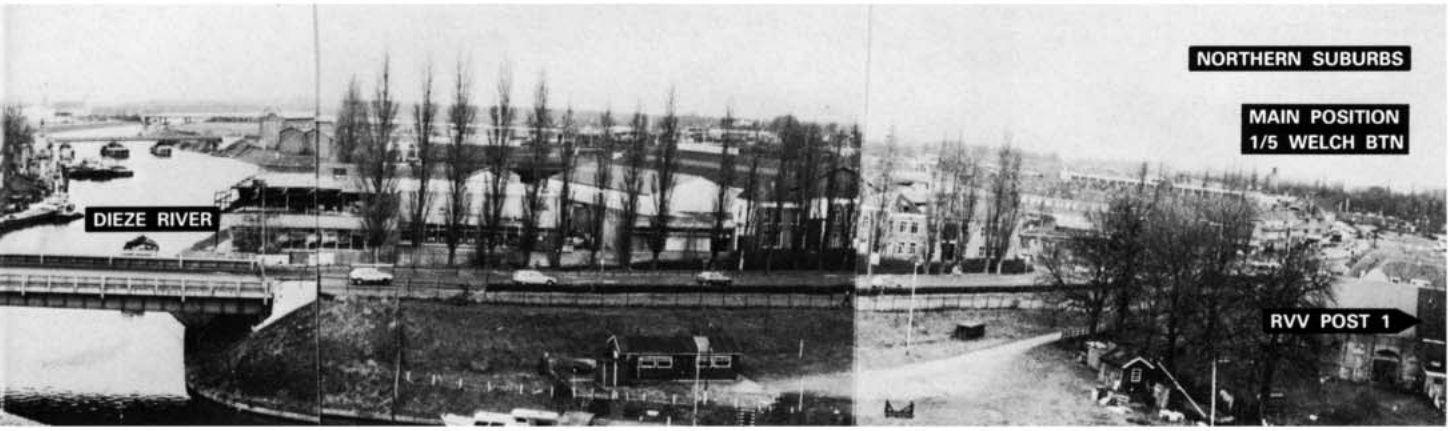
Meanwhile, the team on the north bank had been caught off guard too. Seeing Germans retreating past their house, the three men had made ready to go for the bridge. But before they could act, they heard the British had already crossed it. Now all they could do was inform the latter of the German demolition plans. Thus the brave RVV group saw its carefully-prepared scheme slipping out of its hands.

Meanwhile, the Germans had woken up to the threat of the enemy foothold across the Dieze. Oberst Dewald, the Kampfkommandant, on hearing of the penetration, sent all the troops he could muster to the bridge. Soon B Company was hit by a counter-attack. The platoon on the roundabout ran out of ammunition and were forced to surrender. Helplessly, Morgan watched them being led away. He had now only one platoon left to defend the bridge.

Around 8.00 a.m., the men heard the sound of heavy engines. Their hearts sank as three heavily-camouflaged SPs rolled into view. To eliminate the British toehold, Dewald had called on the StuGs left after the ill-fated counter-attack at Rosmalen. Morgan recalls: 'One tank stopped right at the house we were in. I was on the first floor and I could almost reach out and touch the turret. We had brought along only one Piat. I

The resistance group that planned to save the Dieze bridge for the British. This photo was taken at the group's hideout in a nunnery of Den Bosch, shortly before the men left for their posts — and a three weeks' wait — at the bridge. L-R: Chrèt Jamin, Rook Mertens, the Russians Nicolai Orlow and Arthur Gromuschkow (holding their prize weapon, the German machine gun), Ad van Liempt, Christ Nuyten and the third Russian, Andrei Iwanow (killed by a stray bullet on October 24). Absent are the group's leader, Carel van der Donck, and one member, Jan Rijkers. Note the Russian writing on the blackboard.

David Morgan, in 1944 commanding B Company, 1/5 Welch, points out the house overlooking the southern ramp that was his CP during the fight for the Dieze bridge. The same house had earlier been one of the RVV's look-out posts held by two men with a machine gun. Morgan too returned to Den Bosch in 1984 for the filming of the documentary. (L. Van Gent)



The Dieze bridge — object of the RVV resistance group's plan and scene of 1/5 Welch's heroic stand on October 24. The bridge was slightly modernised in 1986, after this composite photo was made. (L. Van Gent)

looked around for it and, to my horror, saw it lying on the bridge concrete. It had been left there as we crossed, was in full view of the Germans and impossible to retrieve. I was furious and told off the two Piat men, but there was nothing we could do to stop the armour.'

While one SP gave supporting fire, two others rumbled across the bridge to the north bank. Here, at the far end of the other ramp, the rest of 1/5 Welch had taken up position. But their anti-tank guns had not yet reached them. However, two of the East Lancs' guns had and, after an urgent call, one commanded by Sergeant Bradbury arrived just in time to knock out one of the SPs. The second SP quickly withdrew across the bridge.

Although the situation on the north bank had been saved, that on the south bank was hopeless.

Then, shortly after noon, with a sudden, tremendous explosion, the Dieze bridge went up in the air. It deafened the men of B Company and showered them with debris. It is still a mystery what caused the bridge to explode. Perhaps the Welsh had overlooked a demolition wire; the Germans may have managed to re-connect one; or maybe the charges were ignited by a lucky hit by one of the SPs. Whatever the cause, Morgan was now cut off. He decided his men, and their Dutch helpers, would have to make a break for it. The latter, posing as ordinary civilian refugees, eventually managed to escape into the town. Morgan and a dozen men left unwounded, under cover of smoke, made a dash to the river bank, hoping to find a way back across the water. But the Germans showered them with grenades and fired from all sides, including the far bank. Completely exposed, out of all ammunition, half of them now wounded, they raised their hands and surrendered. The fight for the Dieze bridge was over.

Personnel *(above)* **and vehicles** *(below left)* **of Sanitäts-Kompanie 712, the German divisional field ambulance first encountered by Captain Morgan on his way to the Dieze bridge, but properly captured later that night by 1/5 Welch's D Company, being led out of town under guard next morning. (IWM)** *Above right:* **Graafseweg today.** *Below right:* **The same road, looking east towards Hintham. Today, the main road here curves slightly more to the left and shrubbery separates it from the original parallel road. Hinthamerpark, where General Neumann had his HQ, is on the right.**

The massacre of 'the gap'. *Above:* **This is the west end, looking towards where the East Lancs' fire came from which caused havoc among the German columns retreating towards Den Bosch. A 10.5cm leichte Feldhaubitze 18/40 of Artillerie-Regiment 1712 has been knocked out just before it reached the safety of the houses. Already, its draught horses have been removed. (IWM)**

It was a small but important victory for the Germans. For the first time, the British had been thrown back. Perhaps the water line could be held. As for 53 Division, it had gambled and lost. An entry into the town proper would have to be forced elsewhere. The question remains whether, had the division known of the Resistance's plan, the outcome could have been different.

As dawn broke on the 24th, the East Lancs were still in position on the edge of town. Daylight produced an amazing sight. Some 500 yards away, the main road into Den Bosch was visible through a gap in the houses lining it. Through this gap, which was about 100 yards wide, the East Lancs could see columns of German infantry, horse-drawn wagons and artillery, retreating en masse into the town, obviously unaware of their presence nearby. The battalion trained all 12 Bren guns on the gap and opened up with devastating effect. It was just like a shooting gallery. Two horse-drawn field guns were knocked out. Other wagons tried to run the gauntlet of the gap at the gallop. Again and again murderous fire was laid on. Soon, the road was blocked with debris, dead Germans and dead horses. The East Lancs, in their strong perimeter, had no casualties whatsoever.

Yet, if they were to resume the advance from there, they would need tanks. The night's experience had taught that the fields between Rosmalen and Den Bosch were too marshy for any vehicle and there were still no roads open. At 7.00 a.m. General Ross took a difficult decision: the tanks were to go into the town on top of the railway embankment. This was very unorthodox and highly risky, for, high up and silhouetted against the sky, the slow-moving tanks would offer perfect targets for enemy guns.

The unenviable task fell on A Squadron of the Dragoon Guards. Bumping their way over the one-and-a-half miles of sleepers, the crews, sweating it out, thought the journey would never end. But nothing happened. At 10.00 a.m. the first tank reached the East

Below left: **More debris on the other end of the gap. The sight of a hungry civilian cutting up horses for meat was a part of the battle many Welsh veterans would remember most vividly. (IWM)** *Below right:* **New buildings have now closed the entire length of the gap but the houses that marked each end in 1944 still survive and help to establish its position today.**

Hintham, after the fierce fighting of the night of October 23-24. German PoWs transport a wounded comrade to the rear, escorted by a Royal Welsh Fusiliers' medic. (IWM)

Hintham, 40 years later. On the right is the village church where A Company of 6 RWF made their stand when they were flooded by retreating German troops.

The 4.2-inch mortars of 1 Manchesters (53rd Division's heavy weapons battalion) supporting 185 Brigade fighting in Den Bosch from Hinthamerpark. (IWM)

Lancs. In all, only one of the squadron's tanks shed a track. Fortunately, it was the last in the column.

About the same time, the plight of 6 RWF at Hintham finally came to an end. At 8.30 a.m., 7 Royal Welch Fusiliers (Lieutenant-Colonel G.F.T.B. Dickson) had started their planned attack along the main road. Supported by Inniskilling tanks, they reached Hintham around 10.00 a.m. and relieved the exhausted survivors of A Company.

The main road was clear. Both 7 RWF and 1 East Lancs were now in a position to enter Den Bosch.

Sergeant Gee took his photo in Kamperfoeliestraat, the oblong-shaped heart of the park which was rebuilt after the war in a slightly different style.

Save for the trees, the view is unchanged in over 40 years — the Aa river bridge, seized intact by the East Lancs and 5th Dragoon Guards. Sergeant Carpenter took this picture *(left)* **from the town side of the river; the Sherman Firefly on the bridge is returning to the east bank. (IWM)** *Right:* **Karel Margry's picture of the same view today.**

THE CROSSING AT THE LOCKS

In two days of fighting, 712. Division had been virtually destroyed. When Neumann reached Den Bosch, he found that very few of his men had got out of the trap. Of his artillery, only six guns had come out. Now, he and Dewald set about improvising their defence. The town's waterways were ideal defence lines, but only if the bridges over them could be blown. There were not enough explosives for all bridges, so they had to make a choice. Of the Aa river and the Zuid Willems Canal, running side by side, they chose the innermost, the canal, as their new main line. All four bridges over it were hastily prepared for demolition. (Meanwhile, as already described, they also succeeded in blowing the Dieze bridge, the fifth bridge on this line.)

To man the canal line, Dewald had only two battalions, Ewald and Stendhal, left. During the day, with new guns reaching his command, Neumann's artillery force grew very strong again. Sited west and north of the town, the concentrated fire could and did, seriously hamper the British in their advance through the town and cause many casualties among soldiers and civilians.

When the East Lancs and 7 RWF began to advance, both moved towards the Aa bridge at the south-east corner of the town triangle. The East Lancs, with their newly-joined tanks, arrived first and seized the solid stone bridge without a fight. But hope of an easy victory quickly vanished. From the Aa bridge, a narrow winding street led directly to the canal, 350 yards further on, and a large lock. Here were two bridges, one at either end of the lock. The moment an East Lancs platoon entered the street, the Germans blew both. And as the platoon cautiously neared the sluice, it came under heavy fire from the far bank. The canal was going to be a much more difficult obstacle than the river had been.

At 3.45 p.m. 7 RWF, advancing down the main road from Hintham, linked up with the East Lancs and found them in position around the captured Aa bridge. They learned that all bridges over the canal had gone. But the platoon commander who had reconnoitred the locks had some very interesting information. Although the bridges there had been blown, the sluice gates, he said, were intact. Those on the south end were in the closed position and there was a narrow cat-walk leading over them. It looked just possible to cross the canal by way of this foot-bridge.

In a short conference, Colonel Dickson of 7 RWF and Colonel Burden of the East Lancs decided that the Welsh Fusiliers should pass through the East Lancs and try to rush the locks. Dickson gave the order to Major John Dugdale of A Company. To help him across, Dugdale was given a troop of B Squadron of the Iniskillings and the Crocodiles of No. 14 Troop, 141 RAC, all readily available.

Speed was essential. There was no time for further reconnaissance. Instead, aerial

The ability to present an interesting story in *After the Battle* depends so much on whether the actual battle was photographed — and in what detail. With Den Bosch, we are fortunate that Lieutenant Peter Handford of the Army Film and Photograph Unit arrived in the town just in time to film one of the most daring actions of the battle.

Lieutenant Handford arrived on the spot just after the Aa bridge had been seized and before the follow up assault on the canal locks began. He also carried a private camera and this photo *(left)* **from his personal scrapbook shows the prelude to that action: the canal bridge at the end of the street has just been blown and, while the first civilians venture out on the street, the East Lancs await further orders. The M10 is from 340 (SP) Battery, 86 Anti-Tank Regiment, RA, attached to 53 Division for Operation Alan.** *Right:* **The same street, Hinthamereind, today.**

Above left: **Lieutenant Wallworth's Cromwell brewing up on the banks of the Zuid Willem Canal. Wallworth, of No. 2 Troop, A Squadron, 5th Dragoon Guards, was hit (the second tank shot from under him in two days) while on a recce to the last two bridges left over the canal. Riding with him was Lieutenant J. Hall-Bullock, of 555 Company RE, who was to investigate them. The tank was hit from across the water by either a Panzerfaust or an SP. Hall-Bullock and the crew got out safe, but, as they hid behind the burning tank, both bridges were blown up. The picture was secretly taken by Mr A. Janssen from the German-held side of the canal.** *Above:* **The same spot today. The nearest of the two bridges lies on the extreme left of the picture.**

photographs were examined and the East Lancs' platoon commander questioned. There were two streets leading down to the locks. Dugdale ordered one platoon, with two Cromwells and a Crocodile, to take the right-hand one, while he himself with the rest of his company, followed by two Cromwells and two Crocodiles, moved down the left-hand street. The advance to the canal met little opposition. The Crocodiles took up firing positions at the water's edge and began firing high-elevation flame shots across the 90-feet expanse. As the houses on the far side were engulfed in fire, the Cromwells also opened up with their Besa guns.

Left: **Another of Lieutenant Handford's 'unofficial' pictures: a Crocodile of Lieutenant Wilson's troop moving up to support the infantry assault at the locks. The tank's flame nozzle is visible on the right of the hull.** *Right:* **Looking down Graafseweg in 1986, with the Aa bridge just behind the photographer's back.**

Left: **Houses on the far bank burn after the Crocodiles have squirted their lethal flame across the water. Bursts that fell short have hit the lock wall staining it black. (The maximum range of the flame gun was between 90–120 yards.) On the right is the blown bridge on Hinthamereind.** *Right:* **A new apartment building overlooks the canal. After the war two new lifting bridges were built, the nearest one of which has just opened, giving us a good comparison with Handford's picture.**

53
BOSS
STOOTTROEPEN

In 1983, going through the films kept at the Imperial War Museum in London, Karel Margry found a piece of film which, incredibly, not only showed the assault at the locks, but, very briefly, also the man who led it: Major John Dugdale, OC of A Company of 7 RWF. He and his men are on the corner of Van Paeschenstraat and Zuid Willemsvaart and the lock is just around the corner. (IWM)

A real comparison, picturing not only the same spot but the same man. In May 1984, Dugdale returned to tell his story in front of another camera. When shown the film, he recognised himself from his map case which, as he recalled, he tucked inside his battledress just before giving the order to go. Strangely enough, he could remember nothing of the Crocodile standing so close to his right. (L. van Gent)

Dugdale meanwhile formed up his company in the left-hand street. The lock was completely exposed and he had asked for a smoke screen to be laid. The Crocodiles on the right launched smoke canisters from their rear emission fittings and, with each burning for two minutes, this soon built up an effective screen at the canal's edge.

At 4.35 p.m. the assault crossing began.

Unique shots from the film taken by Lieutenant Handford on October 24, 1944. *Above:* **A smoke-screen covers the Welsh Fusiliers as they rush the lock.** *Below left:* **The barbed wire blocking passage to the lock gates has already been removed. (IWM)** *Below right:* **Today the quay line has been altered, but the original footbridge survives.**

After Dugdale had crossed *(above)*, he occupied the town ramparts off the picture to the left. Major Robert Barber followed with B Company and took up position in the houses opposite.

The first section that ran forward had to first remove, with wire cutters, a tangle of barbed wire which blocked passage across the locks. The Germans, seeing what was happening, opened up from houses on the right, but this was immediately silenced by tank fire and more flame. An opening made, the first men jumped down the sluice walls to the narrow cat-walk and ran across. One fusilier was killed.

The second run was led by Dugdale himself. On reaching the far bank, the sections fanned out to the left, towards the park-like ramparts, where they found empty German foxholes and jumped in. Within 15 minutes, the entire company had crossed with only one casualty.

Now it was B Company's turn. The Crocodiles had by now shot all their flame and the smoke screen had dissipated. But the company commander, Major Robert Barber, had arranged a plan with the commander of the right-hand Cromwell, Sergeant Goodwin. As and when each successive section was ready to cross, Barber gave a sign and Goodwin threw out a hand smoke grenade on to the exposed section of the road. In five minutes, the whole of the second company was across without a single casualty.

The Welsh Fusiliers had won an important victory for 53 Division. The canal barrier had been breached. A foothold, albeit a tiny one, had been gained from where an attack could be launched into the heart of the city. But, for this, tanks had to be able to cross the canal. At 7.00 p.m., although the site was being shelled, 282 Company, RE started a Bailey at the locks. Working under artificial moonlight, they had a Class 30 bridge, diagonally across, ready by midnight.

Here Barber (with hat) and Dugdale, both silent in thought, wait for the camera to be set up to record their story. The ramparts are hidden by the trees on the left while the houses Barber occupied are on the right. (L. van Gent)

Chris Hill, in 1944 commanding B Company of 6 RWF, returns to where his men lost heavily in a futile effort to cross the Zuid Willems Canal on the morning of October 25. Note how close the site was to the Dieze bridge and to the German-held factories beyond. (R. van Gent)

As the East Lancs push on up the rampart road, visible in the background, battalion HQ and the regimental aid post are set up in buildings in the small park adjoining it. Note the M10 guarding the street leading into town. The park was heavily shelled by the Germans, causing casualties among infantry and civilians. The picture was taken from the monastery hospital used as an aid post by Dr Armand van Puyvelde, a young Dutch surgeon who treated many of the wounded.

CLEARING THE TOWN CENTRE

Back at divisional HQ, plans were made for next day, October 25. The attack from the bridgehead would be made by 158 Brigade. The East Lancs and 1/5 Welch were to pass through 7 RWF and, with tank support, clear the town. A diversionary assault, carried out in the morning mist and further to the west, by 6 RWF's B Company with three storm boats, met with murderous Spandau fire and, after two attempts, had to be abandoned. If anything, it made clear that, despite the enemy bridgehead, the Germans still clung to the remainder of the canal line and would not easily give up the inner city. Indeed, as the morning wore on, the troops in the bridgehead were subjected to increased shelling and harassed by very accurate sniper fire.

At 8.30 a.m. the East Lancs came into the bridgehead, ready to pass through 7 RWF. But their first attempts immediately ran into a network of automatic and sniping fire. An advance through the centre, with its many narrow streets and winding alleys, was clearly impossible.

A new plan was made. The East Lancs and 1/5 Welch were now ordered to move round the centre itself, the former taking the southerly route, along the ramparts, the latter the north-westerly one, along the enemy-held side of the canal. This advance along two inside legs of the triangle would force the enemy in the centre to withdraw and take both battalions to the Dommel river, the third leg and last water barrier.

At 9.30 a.m. the first Sherman tank rumbled across the Bailey and into the bridgehead. The East Riding Yeomanry, who had been ordered to take over from the Inniskilling Dragoon Guards, had finally reached Den Bosch after a long road march. The leading squadron was immediately rushed forward into battle.

The rampart road, along which the East Lancs attacked, marked the southern limit of Den Bosch. To the left, beneath the city walls and across the moat, stretched a vast expanse of flat polderland. To the right, after each block of housing, a street led off into town. The battalion advanced with three companies leap-frogging, each doing a third of the way and consolidating at the far end of it. The attack went smoothly until, about halfway, it reached the Palace of Justice, an imposing five-storey, yellow-brick building which the Germans had turned into a strong-point. The East Riding tanks were right forward and Major Henri Salmon, B Squadron commander, dismounted and personally jockeyed two of his tanks into a position, 20 yards from the building, from where they could pound the cellar with HE shells and Besa the upper floors. Under this cover, the infantry, led by Salmon on foot, went in and methodically cleared each floor, cornering 19 Germans in the last room of the top one. By then, the building was on fire and half of it burned down before the flames could be put out.

Meanwhile, at 1.30 p.m., 1/5 Welch had also come into the bridgehead. The Bailey was under heavy shelling and they had to dash across by sections. But their advance along the inner side of the canal met little opposition. Supported by the Yeomanry's C Squadron, they cleared all the way up to where 6 RWF had staged its costly assault in the morning, and also occupied the market square right in the middle of town.

Oberst Dewald had by now lost much of his confidence. As his troops were pushed back deeper into the town, he tried to establish a new line right across the centre, but with little success. Around 4.00 p.m.,

The same view on a misty morning in December 1986.

Above: **From a room above her shop, Miss Cato Verhees secretly snaps a demoralised German rearguard . . .** *Right:* **Minutes later the first British arrive . . .**

without consultation with Neumann, he withdrew the remaining StuGs and what was left of his two battalions across the Dommel and ordered the four bridges over it to be blown. Owing to the shortage of proper demolition charges — even aircraft bombs had to be used — the results were poor: the bridges did not collapse but were only cracked, with large gaps in the road surface. Two could still be crossed on foot.

Neumann, who was very dissatisfied with Dewald's handling of the street battle, had just been assigned four Jagdpanthers of schwere Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559, and he sent one of these to the southernmost bridge. Driving through the walls of a house, it took up a concealed position overlooking the river and the large roundabout on the far side.

Not far away, on the rampart road, the East Lancs had resumed their advance and were approaching. As the leading Sherman took the turn onto the roundabout, a sudden shot rang out from across the river and the tank burst into flames. The hidden Jagdpanther had scored its first direct hit.

Until dusk, the German armour dominated this corner. Only after dark did the East Lancs succeed in occupying the houses and garden park overlooking the roundabout. The SP gun could not be located.

. . . followed by Karel Margry with his camera 42 years on! This is Hinthamerstraat.

Above: **An East Lancs platoon approaches the Palace of Justice from the rear. From this side the building seems little damaged, but at the front it was completely gutted after having been shelled by tanks of the East Riding Yeomanry. (IWM)** *Right:* **After the war the junction of Oude Hulst and St Jorisstraat was re-aligned giving a clear view of the restored building.**

Left: **The last hours of German occupation. As firemen try to save a shop set on fire by British shelling and civilians roam the town square, a StuG of Panzerjäger-Abteilung 256 leaves the cover of another department store to take up a better position.**

Shortly after, the Germans would abandon their positions in the town centre. (C. van den Heuvel) *Right:* **Both the shop and the hotel next door burned down completely and new buildings have taken their place.**

The 7th Royal Welsh Fusiliers advance along Hinthamerstraat towards the market square in the background. (C. Verhees)

Meanwhile, 1/5 Welch had found the northernmost Dommel bridge, near the apex of the triangle, effectively blown. Turning south, they approached the stone bridge leading to the railway station on the other side. It looked less damaged but was covered by Spandaus and a self-propelled gun. The battalion took shelter in houses on the river bank.

At last light, 7 RWF, who had been relieved at the locks by 4 Welch and had cleared the city centre, also reached the Dommel, midway between the other two battalions, and found the fourth bridge, a wooden one, blown as well.

The station bridge across the Dommel which was ineffectively blown by the Germans and rushed by 1/5 Welch on the 26th. The Bailey bridge across the nine-foot gap in the middle was built next day by 555 Company RE as a Class 30 bridge and strengthened to a Class 40 by 282 Company RE on the 28th. (C van den Heuvel)

THE LAST BARRIER

185 Brigade was now completely lined up along the river. From north to south were 1/5 Welch, 7 RWF and 1 East Lancs, each with a blown bridge in front of them. During the night, patrols were sent out to each bridge. The wooden one was reported to have a ten-foot gap in the middle and to be definitely unusable; however, the station bridge and the bridge at the roundabout, although holed and cracked, were believed to be still passable for foot soldiers.

Next morning, at a 9.00 a.m. conference, Brigadier Elrington decided that both 1/5 Welch and the East Lancs were to rush their bridge as soon as possible. 7 RWF were to be prepared to pass through whichever bridgehead offered the best prospects of success.

On the other side of the river, the Germans awaited the final assault. In these last hours, there had come a change of command. Late on the 25th, Oberst Dewald had been called away to a new command and left Den Bosch at once. His successor as Kampfkommandant was Major Riedel, an elderly Luftwaffe officer with little battle experience and even less hope of turning the tide of battle. To him, Germany had long since lost the war.

But even without Riedel, the Germans were in a predicament. To man the river line they had only some 450 men left, loosely organised in straggler units. The troops were thoroughly confused and demoralised. Most companies had only one machine gun left. Only the few StuGs and Jagdpanthers gave the positions some strength.

The assault on the station bridge by 1/5 Welch started at 11.00 a.m. on the 26th. To achieve surprise, there was no preparatory shelling. Instead, from streets along the river bank, tanks pumped HE shells into the buildings on the far side, as D Company, led by Major Barney McCall, started to rush the bridge. Jumping over the nine-foot crack along the centre and avoiding unexploded bombs lying on the bridge, the men dashed across and into the corner house on the right. In all, 25 Germans, with two of their precious Spandaus, were taken prisoner before they had time to react.

This looked promising and, at noon, 7 RWF were ordered to cross via the station bridge. By now, however, the Germans had recovered and, as C Company approached the bridge, they came under heavy fire from the flanks and the station building ahead. Only part of one platoon succeeded in getting across and into the house on the corner opposite from Major McCall.

Suddenly, a German SP appeared from a side street off the station square and, with one lucky shot, knocked out an M10 tank destroyer on the far side of the river. As quickly as it had come into view, the SP drove back into cover. This it did several times. Meanwhile, German artillery began to zero in on the crossing site.

Barney McCall (centre), who led D Company of 1/5 Welch across the broken station bridge under fire on the morning of the 25th, relates his adventures to Karel Margry (left) and Bill Owen. Owen was the 1/5 Welch's Intelligence Officer and he was wounded that day trying to contact McCall, by then isolated in his tiny bridgehead. The three are on the station side of the bridge, facing the corner house taken by McCall. (L. Van Gent)

While viewing German newsreels at the Bundesarchiv, Karel and Luc noticed, in the *Wochenschau* of November 11, 1944, a sequence that looked vaguely familiar. Later scrutinisation established that it had indeed been taken at Den Bosch. It was shot on the 26th and actually shows the Germans counter-attacking 1/5 Welch's bridgehead. Hidden by a smoke screen, a StuG drives out of a side street on to the station square and, turning the corner, fires away at the bridge to the left. Then it drives back into cover. (Bundesarchiv) *Below:* **The station square was reconstructed after the war. This is the same street, Bosveldweg, with the square beyond. A statue has replaced the green of 1944.**

Above: **Warned by a Den Bosch resistance man, Martien Suiskens, troops of the East Lancs dash across an alley which is under fire from the Germans across the Dommel. They are moving up Vughterstraat in preparation for the assault of the southern Dommel bridge. (IWM)** *Right:* **A photographer returns: Peter Handford (left), with Luc and Karel, on the same corner, unchanged after 40 years. Handford was one of those in AFPU assigned to make sound recordings for use by the newsreels but, as he recalled 'the noise of the tanks in the streets masked all the other sounds, making further recordings impossible, so I took my camera again and followed the infantry. I soon came upon this corner and took a photograph because it was such a dramatic situation.' After the war, Handford became a movie soundman and, in 1985, won an Oscar for his work on Sidney Pollack's *Out of Africa*. (R van Gent)** *Below left:* **Crocodiles of No. 12 Troop, 141 RAC, rumble towards the roundabout to support the East Lancs' assault. (IWM)** *Below right:* **There has been little change in Vughterstraat since that day.**

Flaming the wrong bridge! In spite of the arrow pointing right, the tanks have circled the roundabout anti-clockwise and attacked the bridge leading away to the south where there are no Germans. An M10 protects the flamethrowers. (IWM)

Shortly after, Brigadier Elrington, seeing the crossing here had become suicidal, ordered further attempts stopped until he had had news of the East Lancs' assault. This left the troops on the far side in an isolated position. As the day wore on, the Germans infiltrated back towards where they were, occupying adjoining houses. If they could not be relieved soon, McCall, by now wounded himself and feeling very lonely, and his men would suffer the same fate as Captain Morgan at the Dieze bridge, only two days before.

Zero Hour for the East Lancs' assault of the roundabout bridge had been set for 11.45 a.m. Colonel Burden had arranged for preliminary shelling of the area where the enemy SP was suspected and for a smoke screen to blind the Germans. Two troops of flame-throwers were to form up in Vughterstraat, one of the streets leading to the roundabout but out of view of the Germans, and at Zero Hour were to drive out, line up on the river bank and flame the enemy trenches on the far side. Then the infantry, also covered by the smoke, were to rush the bridge.

But almost everything that could go wrong, did so. First, the smoke screen would not build up. Again and again, the draught, never absent from the roundabout, blew it away. Secondly, at Zero Hour, for some unexplained reason, the Crocodiles were not ready. Thirdly, because the artillery programme — always a sure sign of attack — had started on time, the delay gave the Germans extra time to prepare for defence. Lastly, when at 1.15 p.m. the Crocodiles finally clattered out of Vughterstraat, they proceeded to flame the wrong bridge!

Two of the roads radiating from the traffic circle had bridges: as seen from Vughterstraat, the one to be flamed was to the right. But it was hidden from view by a petrol station. Straight ahead was another bridge, crossing the town moat and leading south out of town. But there were no Germans there. As it happened, the Crocs of No. 12 Troop circled half the square and wasted most of their flame on the south bridge. Only one discovered the error, took up a new position and fired its last fuel across the Dommel.

The globe has been moved to the left and a multitude of traffic signals obstruct the view but the 'Chalet Royal' restaurant remains a good reference point. (IWM)

A well-known war picture but now one where a name can be put to the photographer and credit given to the man who risked his life to take it. One of the flamethrowers has now found the correct bridge, next to the petrol station, and flames the far bank. (IWM)

No. 13 Troop made no mistake and flamed the correct bridge. One Crocodile was hit by the hidden SP, the shot going through the front armour and, incredibly, burying itself in the side wall, melting and fusing with it, but not causing any casualties.

Notwithstanding all the mix-up, the East Lancs sped across the broken bridge and battered their way into the buildings. Right behind them, anti-tank guns were towed and manhandled across, some falling into holes and being lifted out bodily by the gunners. Soon, PoWs started to pour back. With them came bewildered civilians, fleeing their homes after the long drawn out bombardment. Shortly after, the Germans in their turn began a heavy shelling of the area.

Yet, it was soon clear that the East Lancs' bridgehead offered better prospects than 1/5 Welch's toehold at the station bridge, and Brigadier Elrington ordered 7 RWF — less the portion that had already crossed — to come round to there. Passing through the East Lancs, they were now to fight their way up the other side of the river, towards their besieged comrades at the station bridge.

Handford (right) establishes the exact spot from where he took his picture. (R van Gent)

One of the most poignant and oft-used pictures of war. A Sherman of B Squadron of the East Riding Yeomanry stands in the petrol station as a Dutchman carries two of his children to safety. Handford remembers: 'I was taking cover behind the tank and suddenly this man appeared, holding a little girl under each arm. I thought "where has he come from and where does he think he's going" and I took a picture of it because it was such an extraordinary sight in the middle of a battle.' (IWM)

In May 1984, Handford met the two girls again, and their mother (a glimpse of her can just be seen above the right track of the tank). Toos and Coleta van der Sande were then aged 4 and 5. The Van der Sande family had been driven out of their cellar by the intense bombardment. Fleeing to the liberated part of town, the pram with their bedrolls got stuck on the broken bridge and they had to leave it, but the whole family got across safe. The father, Jo van der Sande, died in 1968. L-R: Luc van Gent, Toos van der Sande, Peter Handford, Mrs van der Sande, Coleta van der Sande and Karel Margry. (F. Janssens)

Above: **The Dommel bridge at the roundabout stormed by the East Lancs. Damage caused by the German demolitions is clearly visible. The scissors bridge laid shortly after the assault, was replaced two days later by the Class 40 Bailey seen here. It was built by 282 Company, RE. (J. Cappers)** *Below:* **Neatly repaired and with a stone railing added, the bridge today handles an almost continuous flow of traffic. Note the filling station on the far side, with Vughterstraat beyond.**

At 4.50 p.m. a bridge-laying AVRE from 222 Assault Squadron RE placed a scissors bridge over the broken bridge at the roundabout, enabling the Yeomanry tanks to cross. While the East Lancs, with B Squadron, cleared the area towards the railway line, the Welch Fusiliers, with C Squadron, started the attack northwards, astride the broad avenue leading to the station. Progress was slow. At 10.00 p.m., 7 RWF finally made contact with the hard-pressed troops at the station bridge, first relieving the two platoons of their own and later those of 1/5 Welch. All through the night, the station buildings, which had caught fire, burned furiously.

On the morning of the 27th, Neumann wrote to Riedel: 'The Führer has personally telephoned and ordered your position to be held in all circumstances' (Whether this was true or just a final try at exhortation is unknown; the letter was later captured by 6 RWF). Neumann also ordered a last counter-attack. At 8.10 a.m. three Jagdpanthers and five StuGs — all his armour — with some 150 infantry came into Den Bosch from the west. They were spotted crossing the railway yards and dispersed by artillery and mortars. Four SPs got as far as the station square where they were stopped by 7 RWF. One was knocked out by Major Barber with a Piat, one by a Sherman, one by a 17-pounder and the last, later in the day, by an M10.

Above left: **The East Lancs' 6-pounders were manhandled across the broken bridge in a great hurry because the enemy SP that had guarded the bridge was still thought to lurk in the houses on the river bank. By pure chance, Handford photographed Sergeant Bradbury's gun, the one that had knocked out the German SP at the Dieze bridge two days earlier. L-R: are Corporal Johnson, Private Carter, Bradbury himself and Private Addis. (IWM)** *Above right:* **This quarter of Den Bosch was so ruined by shelling that it had to be demolished after the war. A large office block of the Provincial Electricity Company replaced the former houses on Willemsplein.**

After that, the German defence disintegrated completely. When the East Lancs, with Crocodile and tank support, attacked the Willem I Barracks, just west of town, they found it empty. When at noon, 7 RWF resumed clearing operations to the north, also met very little opposition. At the railway sidings, men of B Company saw a lone figure in a long coat running away over the sleepers. When captured, he was discovered to be none other than the German Kampfkommandant. Riedel, who had told his few remaining men to make their way to the west, he himself, as he said, preferred captivity to a certain court-martial which would have awaited him had he managed to return to the German lines unscathed.

At dusk, troops of 6 RWF, who had taken over from the 7th, reached the blown Dieze bridge — site of the first bid to enter the town — 53 Division had completed a full circle through Den Bosch.

The battle was over. Both sides had lost heavily. In six days, 53 Division had lost more than 450 men: 123 killed, 270 wounded and 75 missing. All told, British losses in the battle for 's-Hertogenbosch totalled 144 killed. German casualties were not recorded in detail but, in his final report, Neumann stated that his division had in practice ceased to exist. Some 1,700 of his men, including two regimental and two battalion commanders, had ended up with Riedel in a British PoW cage.

Inevitably, civilian losses were also high: 118 inhabitants of Den Bosch had lost their lives, more than 80 had been seriously wounded. Material damage was enormous: all the bridges except three had been blown and there was literally not a house left undamaged. Of all premises, 722 had been completely destroyed and another 1,057 badly damaged. In some areas, where shelling had been especially heavy (the 53rd's artillery alone had fired 89,932 shells during the battle), nothing was left but ruins. Den Bosch had paid a heavy price for its liberation. Miraculously, the majestic cathedral had survived almost unscathed.

By the beginning of November, the progress of the Canadian Army's I Corps and Second Army's XII Corps in clearing the German stronghold south of the Maas left the Germans holding two pockets. The one facing XII Corps to the west of 's-Hertogenbosch, behind the Afwaterings Canal, was dealt with by 51 Division, which attacked on November 4 with 7 Armoured Division co-operating on the left, and was mopped up by the following afternoon. Facing I Corps, the one south of the confluence of the Maas and the Waal, behind the Mark Canal, took from late October to November 8 to eliminate, with the Germans destroying the huge Moerdijk bridges as they withdrew. That same day, resistance came to an end on the island of Walcheren — the last German bastion barring the entrance to the Scheldt. Once the estuary was swept of mines, Antwerp would finally be open to Allied shipping.

The StuG III knocked out by Major Barber of 7 RWF during the last German counter-attack, in a rather unusual way. Barber was on a backyard balcony and, with buildings in between, could not see the SP himself. He tied a Piat to the balcony railing, so that he could use it as a mortar, and fired at an angle over the rooftops, while one of his sergeants acted as observer and shouted corrections from down below. After three shots, Barber scored a direct hit. (Gemeente-archief Den Bosch)

New panes have been put in the windows of the Post Office on Bosveldweg. The same building is visible in the centre photo on page 33 and it shows that the StuG was almost on the station square when it was hit.

After the war, ties between 53 Division and Den Bosch remained strong. On the first anniversary of the battle, the division held a mass parade and presented the town with a large Remembrance Shield showing all regiments and arms that had taken part in the battle. Later, the division again chose Den Bosch for the Divisional Memorial for North-West Europe, 1944-1945. It was unveiled in 1952. Ever since, a delegation from Wales has taken part in the liberation remembrance ceremonies held each year in October.

In 1983, with the 800th anniversary of the town, scheduled for 1985, in sight, interest in more recent history picked up too, resulting in the creation in Den Bosch of a Foundation October 1944. In 1984, the present writer, Karel Margry, and Luc van Gent, from Den Bosch, made a 60-minute documentary on the battle which was shown on Dutch television. Van Gent was also the driving force behind a massive, five-day Thanksgiving Reunion for the Liberators of 1944, held in October 1985, as part of the 800 years' festivities. It was the first divisional reunion since 1945 and over 1,600 British visitors, of whom 464 were veterans of the battle, took part. In 1986, a special 'Welsh Room' was opened in the town hall housing the Remembrance Shield and a permanent display on the battle.

The march of the Den Bosch veterans. On October 23, 1985, as part of the 800th anniversary celebrations of the founding of 's-Hertogenbosch, 464 'Liberators of 1944' returned, entering the town along Hinthamerstraat. (W. Dodemont)

In October 1988, HRH the Prince of Wales, during his official visit to Holland, laid a wreath at the Welsh Memorial and made a tour of the city.

The film 'October 1944 — The Battle for 's-Hertogenbosch' with commentary in English is available on VHS/Betamax video-cassette (PAL format) direct from the secretary: L. van Gent, Aristoteleslaan 17, 5216 CN, 's-Hertogenbosch, Netherlands. Price £35.00 including post and packing.

The Welsh Division's memorial on Hekellaan stands on the exact spot along the railway where the first British troops entered the town on October 24, 1944. Forty-one years later a thanksgiving service recalled the day of liberation. (G. van Kessel)

AFTER THE
BATTLE
READERS' INVESTIGATIONS
In Loving Memory Of
EMLYN HOWELLS,
BELOVED BROTHER OF MAY BRITTON
DIED JAN. 6, 1943, AGED 45 YEARS.
Also of EDWIN BRITTON
BELOVED HUSBAND OF MAY BRITTON
DIED JAN. 14, 1955, AGED 59 YEARS
ALSO HIS BELOVED WIFE
ETHEL MAY BRITTON
DIED AUG. 28, 1982, AGED 86 YEARS

MAJOR MARTIN ... THE STORY CONTINUES

In November 1986 *After the Battle* published the results of Roger Morgan's extensive research into the background of Operation Mincemeat, more commonly known as 'The Man Who Never Was' after the title of the book by the Hon. Ewan Montagu. As one of the organisers of the operation, Montagu had obtained a corpse and dumped it with spoof documents and a false identity off the coast of Spain. It was hoped that the Spanish authorities would accept it for what it purported to be — a Royal Marines officer courier carrying high level documents concerning Allied intentions in the Mediterranean theatre — and consequently pass on the information to German Intelligence. The body came ashore at Huelva in south-west Spain in April 1943 and was buried in the local cemetery under the pseudonym 'Major William Martin', but not before the documents he was carrying had been copied and passed to the Abwehr. The Germans accepted them as genuine and undoubtedly many lives were saved when the Allies came to invade Sicily three months later.

Ever since then the identity of Major Martin has been a closely guarded secret, Montagu claiming that he alone was the only person who knew who he really was. He died in July 1985 (the year before our article was published), supposedly taking the secret to his grave.

Five years earlier Roger Morgan had begun his research to put a name to the man in the grave in Spain, and in *After the Battle* No. 54 we ventured a possible candidate. We did not claim to have proved conclusively that Reginald Harrison *was* Major Martin — only that in the area under the jurisdiction of Sir Bentley Purchase (the coroner in league with Montagu to find a suitable body), it was the only *recorded* death which fitted. Even then, as several of our medical readers pointed out, the cause of Harrison's death would not have convinced *them* that death had been caused by drowning (see *After the Battle No. 58*).

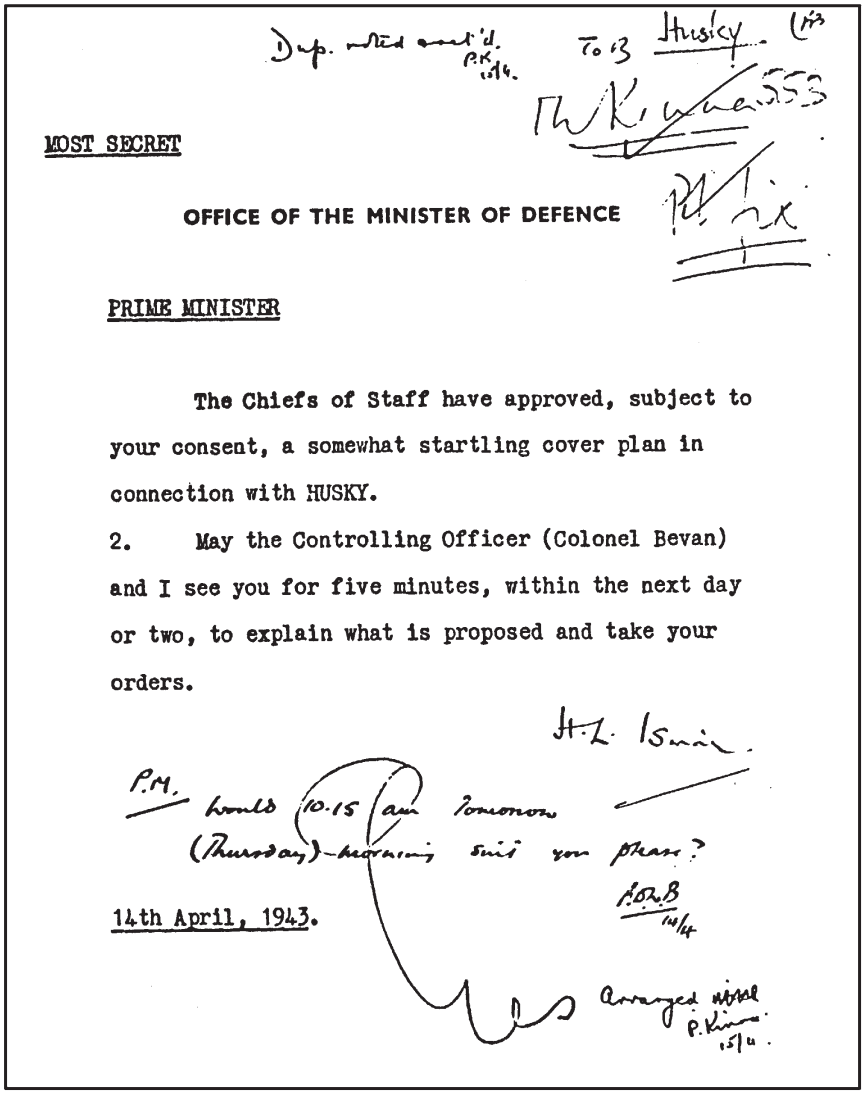
The mystery of the true identity of 'The Man Who Never Was' has intrigued historians for 40 years. We put forward a possible candidate in Issue No. 54 of *After the Battle*; Colin Gibbon (*top*) believes he has an even better choice.

Coincidentally, but completely independently, historian James Rusbridger's interest had been aroused by a paragraph in the latest volume of Martin Gilbert's biography of Winston Churchill. In *Road to Victory*, in a piece concerning Operation Mincemeat, Gilbert quotes from a recollection given to Randolph Churchill by Colonel John Bevan, head of the London Controlling Section responsible for British strategic deception plans during the war. Although the interview (at which Gilbert was present as an observer) had been conducted in May 1967, it was not published until late September 1986. In it the former LCS chief recalled his visit to Churchill to get the operation approved 'at half-past nine one morning' although Gilbert recalls that Bevan could not remember the precise date.

'I handed him a piece of paper — one sheet of foolscap as usual — to explain what we intended to do', recalled Bevan. 'He read it and I said, well, of course there's a possibility that the Spaniards might find out that this dead man was in fact not drowned at all from a crashed aircraft, but was a gardener in Wales who'd killed himself with weed-killer. However Bernard Spilsbury had explained to me that this was very unlikely because it was a very difficult technical job to find out the cause of death; weed-killer gets into the kidneys and is very difficult to diagnose. Apparently it would take you three weeks to a month just to find out what it was.'

The 'Welsh gardener' theory was not new, but at last it appeared that a positive clue had been found to Martin's origins. James Rusbridger, in concert with a *Sunday Times* reporter, began to tackle this angle. Several possible death certificates were obtained from St Catherine's House but each was discarded for one reason or another. James wrote to the editor of every newspaper in Wales asking for their support in publishing a request for information, and gave a long interview on BBC Radio Wales in March 1987. Neither this nor the letters produced any response, suggesting that the person in question did not commit suicide in Wales.

Colin Gibbon, an ex-policeman living at Pontypridd, Glamorgan, was already independently checking the Welsh angle because the fictitious wording on the Spanish gravestone records Martin as coming from Cardiff. As a fellow Welshman, he was naturally interested to see if this connection had any basis in reality.



Dup. retd & sent'd. P.R. 13/4. To C Husky

MOST SECRET

OFFICE OF THE MINISTER OF DEFENCE

PRIME MINISTER

The Chiefs of Staff have approved, subject to your consent, a somewhat startling cover plan in connection with HUSKY.

2. May the Controlling Officer (Colonel Bevan) and I see you for five minutes, within the next day or two, to explain what is proposed and take your orders.

H.L. Ismay

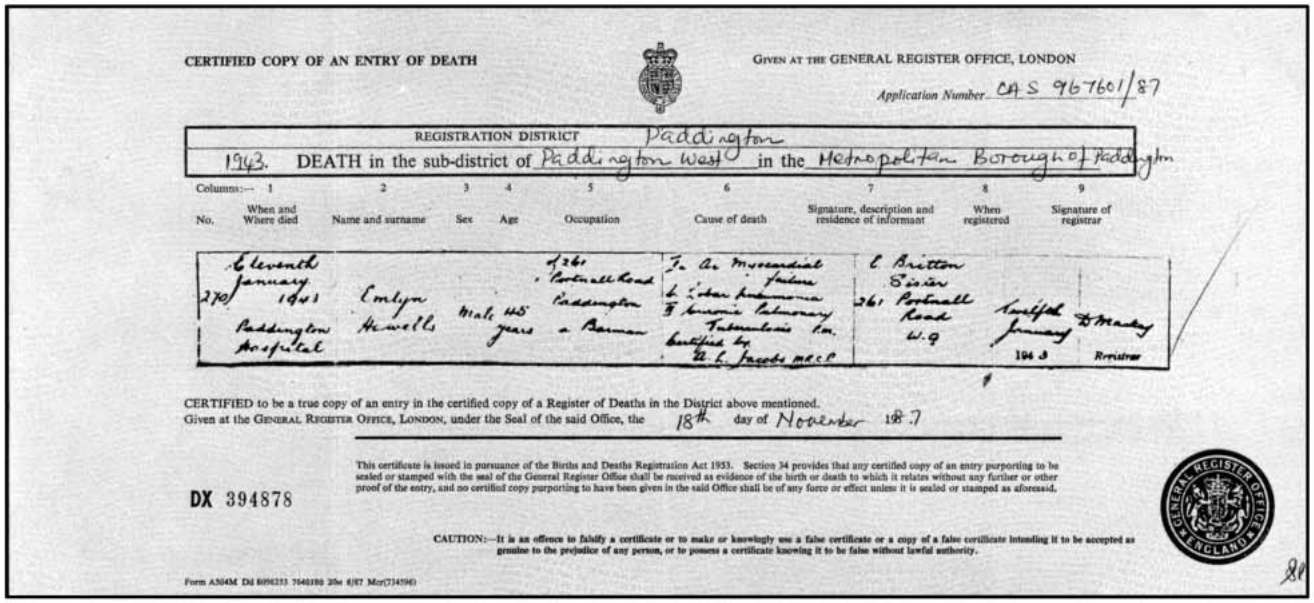
14th April, 1943.

P.M. Would 10.15 am tomorrow (Thursday) morning suit you please?

A.D.B. 14/4

Arranged 10.15 P. Kinna 15/4.

The original memo (now in the Public Record Office file PREMIER 3/227/6) in which Colonel John Bevan, head of the London Controlling Section, requests an appointment with the Prime Minister to get Churchill to approve the plan for Operation 'Mincemeat'. The idea had originated with Flight Lieutenant Charles Cholmondeley of MI5 who was acting as liaison officer with the LCS deception team.



CERTIFIED COPY OF AN ENTRY OF DEATH

GIVEN AT THE GENERAL REGISTER OFFICE, LONDON

Application Number CAS 967601/87

REGISTRATION DISTRICT Paddington

1943. DEATH in the sub-district of Paddington West in the Metropolitan Borough of Paddington

Columns:— 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
No.	When and Where died	Name and surname	Sex	Age	Occupation	Cause of death	Signature, description and residence of informant	When registered	Signature of registrar
270	Eleventh January 1943 Paddington Hospital	Emlyn Howells	Male	45 years	4261 Portnall Road Paddington a Barman	1a Acute Myocardial failure 1b Lobar Pneumonia 1c Bronchial Pulmonary Tuberculosis 1m. Certified by W. L. Jacobs M.C.P.	L Britten Sister 261 Portnall Road W.9	Twelfth January 1943	D Manley Registrar

CERTIFIED to be a true copy of an entry in the certified copy of a Register of Deaths in the District above mentioned.
Given at the GENERAL REGISTER OFFICE, LONDON, under the Seal of the said Office, the 18th day of November 1987

This certificate is issued in pursuance of the Births and Deaths Registration Act 1953. Section 34 provides that any certified copy of an entry purporting to be sealed or stamped with the seal of the General Register Office shall be received as evidence of the birth or death to which it relates without any further or other proof of the entry, and no certified copy purporting to have been given in the said Office shall be of any force or effect unless it is sealed or stamped as aforesaid.

DX 394878

CAUTION:—It is an offence to falsify a certificate or to make or knowingly use a false certificate or a copy of a false certificate intending it to be accepted as genuine to the prejudice of any person, or to possess a certificate knowing it to be false without lawful authority.

GENERAL REGISTER OFFICE ENGLAND

Form A504M Dd 8096253 7640180 20m 8/87 Mer(7345961)

Death certificate for Emlyn Howells, the new possibility suggested by our reader, Colin Gibbon and historian, James Rusbridger. At least Howell's origins fit the Welsh theory — he was born in Treorchy — although if Bevan's post war recollection is correct regarding 'Martin's' death by weed-killer poisoning, the cause of death does not tally.

Left: **The only known portrait of Emlyn Howells and** *right* **Major Martin being prepared for war at Hackney Mortuary. Is it the same man?**

Montagu wrote that they 'chose Cardiff as his birthplace for no particular reason', and failed to give any explanation for the choice of parentage, given on the stone as 'son of John Glyndwyr Martin and the late Antonia Martin of Cardiff, Wales'. But did the inscription hide any clues? Colin had a hunch that it did, and he made contact with James Rusbridger.

Colin visited Huelva in June 1987, and on his return decided to take pot luck and visit the largest cemetery in the Rhondda area at Treorchy, 20 miles from Cardiff. He felt — like us — that Montagu's thoroughness in covering his tracks would most probably have included a mock funeral and burial in Britain to preserve the anonymity of the corpse.

Checking the cemetery register for the winter of 1942–43 he found three male burials between December 1942 and February 1943 aged 33, 42 and 45 years. It was that same weekend that Colin spotted the appeal by James Rusbridger for anyone to contact him who knew of a Welsh gardener who had committed suicide by drinking weed-killer and he realised that he too was searching for the elusive 'man who never was'. They compared notes, more cemeteries were checked for possible candidates, and old newspapers of the period were scoured for possible clues.

Although Colin had initially rejected the burials at Treorchy, when he looked into it further he found that the 45-year-old man had died in London, in Sir Bernard Spilsbury's own hospital and within the area covered by Sir Bentley Purchase, both of whom Montagu had inveigled into the search for a body.

The man, Emlyn Howells, had been born on September 16, 1898 and had died on January 11 . . . according to the register. However, when Colin checked the headstone the date of death was given as January 6. Although this could be explained by a clerical or stonemason's error — it has been done before — nevertheless Colin was suspicious and he decided to try to contact Howells' family. May and Edwin Britton — Howells' sister and brother-in-law — were both dead, but their daughter, Mrs Dulcie Fletcher, was traced living in Buckinghamshire. She confirmed the date of Emlyn's death as being the 6th, but said that other than that she had no knowledge of any double-dealings with her uncle's grave or body.

The death certificate indicated that the cause of death was tuberculosis on January 11, 1943. However, it also stated that a post-mortem had been carried out which would have made the body useless for the purpose intended. But when James Rusbridger checked the post-mortem records at St Mary's Hospital, Paddington, where Howells died, there was no entry to substantiate this.

Colin had been in touch with us several times during his research although unsure how to bring the matter to a suitable conclusion. While he deliberated on the best course of action, his colleague, James, prepared the story for publication.

Approaches had already been made to the *Sunday Express* and *Sunday Telegraph*, neither of which were interested, and the story finally appeared in the *Western Mail* at the end of November 1988. It was immediately seized upon by *The Mail on Sunday* which purchased the rights for publication on December 4.

When researching historical incidents one must always guard against the temptation to fit coincidental data into preconceived ideas; i.e. to make the evidence fit the facts. Although Colin's evidence appeared quite strong, it was all circumstantial and without any corroboration being available from the next-of-kin that Howells was the man. However, it must be admitted that there was a marked similarity between the photograph of Howells and the picture of the corpse in Hackney Mortuary.

Colin had written to Ewan Montagu's daughter, Jennifer, giving her the name, asking for confirmation, but was told that 'it may have been better to let the whole matter remain in the dignity of obscurity rather than meddling in it.'

When we spoke to Colin a few days before publication in *The Mail on Sunday* we asked him why he had not contacted Montagu's

Howells, left, with his parents.

widow instead of his daughter, but he said he thought she would reject any direct approach and in any case, according to the *Telegraph* reporter Mrs Montagu did not know the identity of Major Martin.

All this time *After the Battle* stood on the sidelines, not wishing to interfere with or compromise the Gibbon/Rusbridger theory. However, on December 2, two days prior to publication of the article in the *Mail*, your Editor telephoned Mrs Montagu with whom we had achieved some rapport during our own investigations. She said she knew nothing about the planned article and no one had contacted her about it, but said that 'it must be to do with a policeman in Wales who has written to my daughter'. She said that there 'was really no point in talking to Jennifer because she does not know the name'.

When we mentioned the name which was to appear in the *Mail* article two days hence, Mrs Montagu replied simply: 'I know the real name and it is not the correct one. It was meant to be a secret and that is the way it should be left.'

Following publication in *The Mail on Sunday*, James Rusbridger received various new pieces of information about the background to the affair. One of these confirmed that all the stories about Ewen Montagu having given a solemn promise to Martin's family never to reveal his name were false. This fiction was invented by Montagu at the request of Spilsbury and Purchase to protect their ethical integrity because they had hijacked the body without contacting the next-of-kin. Purchase evidently told Montagu that the body was that of a pauper who had died in London as the result of taking rat poison and that there was no family to worry about and he would take care of the necessary legal paperwork. It follows therefore that what Montagu knew about Martin may not have been the result of the 'feverish inquiries' he claims to have made in his book but simply what he was told. All Montagu needed to know was that the body was medically suitable and could be used without any fuss.

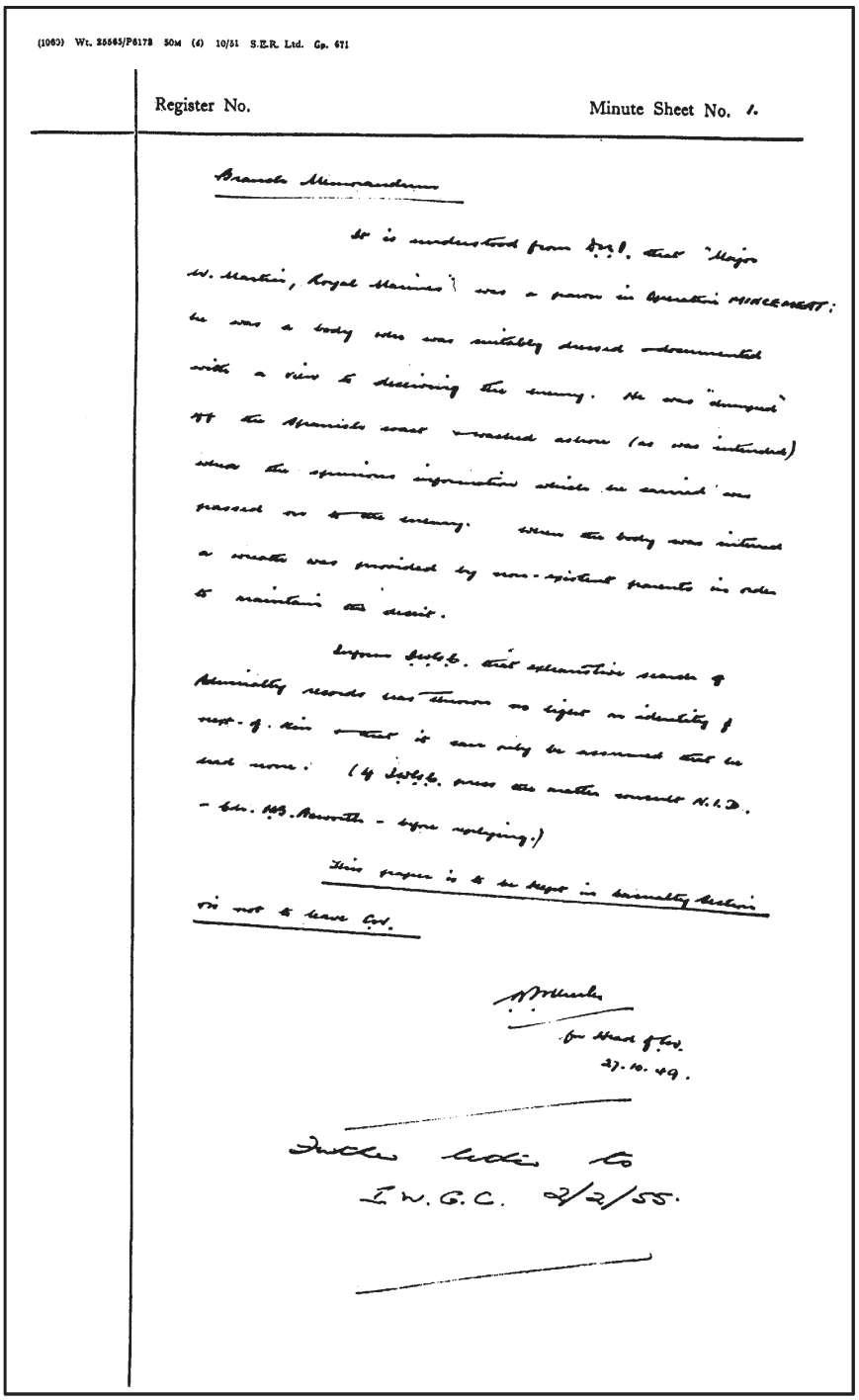
Montagu was also told that the man was Welsh, although James has been told that he did not have a particularly Welsh-sounding name, and that at one time he had been a gardener.

James has now been able to establish that the body was acquired not in the autumn of 1942, as Montagu claimed, but in January 1943 and Montagu was advised that since it was being kept under refrigeration at 4°C at Hackney mortuary, it would have to be used within about three months. Montagu's claim that it was deep frozen is also untrue for had this been the case no time limit on the body's use would have been necessary.

A further request by Roger Morgan to the Secretary of the Cabinet Office for the official file to be made public was met with a polite, yet firm, response that 'the records relating to Operation Mincemeat continue to be closed under Section 3(4) of the Public Records Act and no date has been set for their release'.

James Rusbridger believes that at this long distance of time, with no useful archival material available, and all the participants dead, it is impossible to say how much of what has been claimed about Martin is true or was conveniently invented by Spilsbury and Purchase to protect their professional reputations — especially as it was never anticipated that the story would be made public. He says that 'after 1953 Montagu evidently made no effort to check if Martin did have a family who might share in some of the wealth created by the book and film'.

Writing in January 1989, James pointed out two odd facets which still remained unanswered. First, why was Martin given the religion of a Roman Catholic which is not commonly found amongst Welshmen? And second, having gone to such lengths to create the fictional military background, why was there no reference to Martin's rank or unit on his gravestone and why was he not buried with a standard military headstone?



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Register No. Minute Sheet No. 1.

Branch Memorandum

It is understood from DNI that "Major W. Martin, Royal Marines" was a person in Operation MINCEMEAT; he was a body who was suitably dressed & documented with a view to deceiving the enemy. He was "dumped" off the Spanish coast & washed ashore (as was intended) when the spurious information which he carried was passed on to the enemy. When the body was interred a wreath was provided by non-existent parents in order to maintain the deceit. Inform IWGC that exhaustive search of Admiralty records has thrown no light on identity & next-of-kin & that it can only be assumed that he had none. (If IWGC press the matter consult NID - Cdr. N.B. Acworth - before replying.)

This paper is to be kept in Admiralty Section & not to leave CW.

for Head of CW
27.10.49.

Letter sent to I.W.G.C. 2/2/55.

A very interesting document turned up by James Rusbridger during his research in Admiralty file ADM 1/25230. It reads as follows: 'Branch Memorandum. It is understood from DNI [Director of Naval Intelligence] that "Major W. Martin, Royal Marines" was a person in Operation MINCEMEAT; he was a body who was suitably dressed and documented with a view to deceiving the enemy. He was "dumped" off the Spanish coast & washed ashore (as was intended) when the spurious information which he carried was passed on to the enemy. When the body was interred a wreath was provided by non-existent parents in order to maintain the deceit. Inform IWGC [Imperial War Graves Commission] that exhaustive search of Admiralty records has thrown no light on identity and next-of-kin and that it can only be assumed that he had none. (If IWGC press the matter consult NID [Naval Intelligence Department] — Commander N. B. Acworth — before replying). This paper is to be kept in Admiralty section and is not to leave CW. (signature) for Head of CW 27.10.49.' Now look at the printer's imprint date recording when the minute sheet was produced. If that really is 10/51 (and not 10/31) then the form was printed two years after the letter was written. Another can of worms!

In the absence of an alternative name, the circumstantial link between Howells and Martin remains an attractive one but, as Rusbridger has consistently pointed out, unfortunately lacks the final proof that is now unlikely to be forthcoming.

Little Edna Joan Virginia, seven years old, on Remembrance Day at Swindon War Memorial.

GI BABY

In his book *The GI's* Norman Longmate, that inveterate chronicler of wartime Britain, devoted considerable research to the one activity for which the American soldier has achieved a reputation for extravagance. 'Invading armies had traditionally carried off with them the young women of the land they had occupied', wrote Norman in 1975. 'The Americans, doing things as usual on the grand scale, removed whole shiploads, the largest, and certainly the most willing, such contingent ever to leave the shores of Britain.'

To the 70,000-plus GI brides, many with children, who made the journey to the States, an even larger number of girls were left behind with broken promises. The liaisons begun in the dark days of 1943 and 1944 also left behind another legacy — a minor population explosion. In spite of his extensive research, Norman Longmate commented that 'the full number of such offspring is unknown, because the children's parentage was often concealed, but must run into many tens of thousands'. Understandably Norman always conceals the identity of his correspondents, his integrity thereby encouraging people to open their hearts when otherwise they might be reluctant to do so. He wrote that 'one former British airman from Bedford knows personally of three such cases: "I am quite certain that none of these now adult people know of their origin, as it was decided by the three families never to tell them, so that they could feel integrated with other children, which in each case came along later".'

On the other hand to those children that did know, the illegitimacy was something hard to accept: ignorance may be bliss but a half-truth can be almost impossible to live with. Such was the case with Mrs Virginia Sims around whom our story is told.

Virginia was born on September 1, 1944 — the day General Eisenhower was entrusted with the direct operational control of the victorious Allied armies in their advance across Europe. At home — and home for Virginia was Station Road, Swindon — the country was undergoing a new threat of bombardment by pilotless aircraft, while an even more frightening form of attack by supersonic rocket was just around the corner.

The immaturity of Virginia's mother — just 16 years of age — led within days of the birth to the little baby being taken into the care of her grandparents. Named Edna Joan Virginia after her grandmother, it was only in later years that Virginia dropped her first two Christian names by deed poll. All the young Edna had been told was that her father had been a medic in the US Army and that his name was Jimmy. Any further details, insisted her grandfather, must wait until she was much older.

Her grandparents doted on her, Virginia thinks because she was seen as almost a replacement for her grandmother's other daughter who had died in infancy. A bicycle, bought as a treat for winning a singing competition, became her pride and joy and it enabled her to take her first faltering steps in her search to find her father. Virginia recalls that she was just eleven when she used to ride up the steep hill to the only place she knew where there were American Servicemen: the US military hospital at Burdrop Camp. There she would ask the man on the gate if she could see 'her daddy'. Many times, she remembers, she stood outside waiting for the father whom she had never seen.

By that time, the mid-1950s, her mother had married and was raising a large family and, although Virginia would visit her younger step brothers and sisters once in a while,

Above: **Camp Chisledon, two miles south of Swindon, as it appeared in 1943.**

her mother would tell her nothing of the brief wartime affair which had brought her into the world. Without the father figure she longed for, Virginia openly admits she 'went off the rails'. In adolescence she became uncontrollable, ran away from home and played truant from school. She was expelled when she was 12 and was taken into care, being sent from one children's home to another. She ended up in a remand home for children, recalling now some 25 years later that her overwhelming feeling at the time was one of not belonging.

Her grandfather died on her 16th birthday without revealing anything further about Jim but, there and then, Virginia made up her mind that one day she would find her father.

While still in the care of the social services, she absconded to London and at 17 married a Maltese more, she says, out of wanting to show the authorities that she would not be tied down or locked away. The disastrous relationship, which left her beaten black and blue more times than she can remember, lasted ten years.

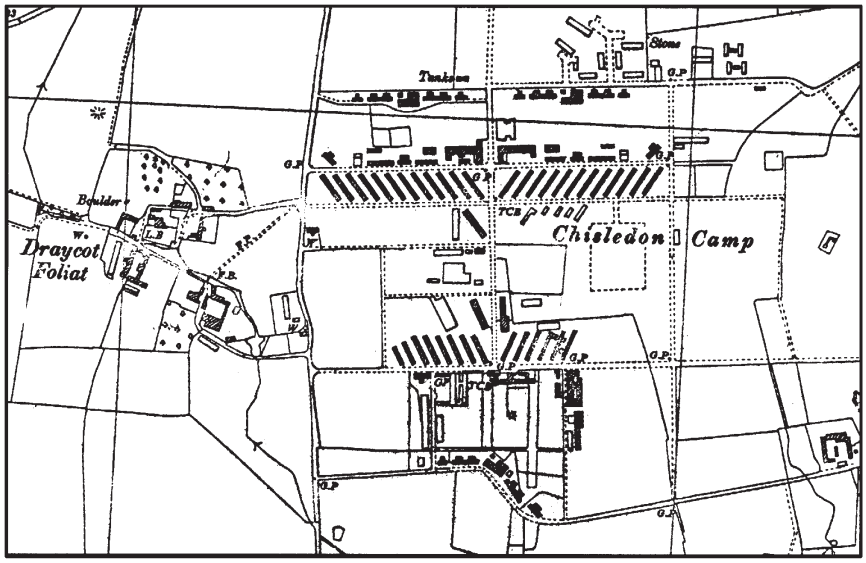
In 1972 she met her present husband, Rod, then in the City of London Police, and the turning point in her life came when they married in December 1973. At last she had found the stable relationship she craved, her aversion to authority finally being buried when she became a store detective in Rainham, Essex.

Mrs Virginia Sims, as she then was, moved back to Swindon but all this time her mother steadfastly refused to discuss anything about Jim, his background or who he was. It was obvious that having broken his promise to return after the war, the bitter realisation that both mother and baby had been abandoned had cut her deeply with a wound which time had failed to heal. All Virginia knew was from what her grandmother had remembered: that Jim's surname was something like 'Delmore'.

All's fair in love and war . . . so they say. Here GIs play games at Chisledon in May 1943 to demonstrate German basic infantry manoeuvres.

An appeal in 1984 to the Salvation Army in America was rebuffed curtly when she admitted that her parents were not married: 'We are here to bring families together,' the voice came down the line, 'not break them up.'

In 1978 the camp was demolished — we were fortunate enough to record its final death throes.



Following her second marriage, Virginia Sims as she now was, moved with her husband, Rod, from Essex back to where she grew up. Their first house was in Swindon but when the chance came up of an exchange with another council tenant, who wanted to move from the country into the town, she grabbed it. Quite coincidently her new home was in Draycot Foliat — right opposite the old camp.

Still convinced that her father was alive, Virginia, now herself actively fostering young children in care, moved first to Stratton on the outskirts of Swindon and then to Chisledon, just off the A345 to Marlborough. Set among the rolling Wiltshire countryside, her modest council home stood directly opposite the old School of Army Administration which, coincidently, had become an American Army base during the war and was the scene of the shooting of Private Harold Smith in 1943 (*see After the Battle No. 59*). The camp buildings had been demolished before she moved in but during frequent walks along the rubble-strewn roads and pathways, she somehow felt a certain closeness with the father she longed to know.

During the visit of a friend on August Bank Holiday 1988, the subject came up in conversation of what each held as their most dearest wish. Naturally to Virginia there was only one and she became determined to try to settle the matter with her mother once and for all. A new forthrightness came over her as she picked up the phone.

'Can I speak to you?'

'What's the matter?' replied her mother.

'I want some information.'

'About what?'

'About my dad.'

'Oh God!' her mother exclaimed. 'You are not going to give up are you, after all this time. Alright. You had better come and see me and I will tell you all I know.'

Straight away Rod drove her over.

Her father's name, Virginia's mother told her, was James Delmar. He was about 5ft 6in and 24 or 25 years old. He had dark brown hair and brown eyes and a lovely skin. She said that he had told her he was married but that she thought he would come back for her and the child. The badge he wore was a staff with a serpent around it [insignia of the US Medical Corps which confirmed what Virginia had been told by her grandmother]. His home was in Alabama and she had met him while he was stationed at Chisledon Camp!

Although one might have assumed that Jim must have been serving in the Swindon area to have met her mother, Virginia could hardly believe her ears when she heard that she now lived a few yards from where her father had been stationed. To her, and her religious beliefs inherited from her grandfather's spiritualist background, it was the vindication of feelings she had experienced whenever she visited the old campsite.

Although she now knew far more than ever before, Virginia was still at a loss to know where to take it from there. Phone calls to the American Embassy proved fruitless as did an enquiry to the US Army Record Center at St Louis.

All this, of course, was unknown to your Editor when one day in September 1988 a call was put through to me 'from a lady who wanted to find out how she could trace her father'. The lady explained that her local Parish Clerk, one of our readers, had advised her to contact us as he was sure we would be able to help. She then told me her story. Admittedly the tracing of ex-Servicemen is something we have had not a little experience of over the years and, in this instance, I considered that, as the lady knew her father's home State, a request to the Alabama Driver's License Bureau would be worth trying first. Unlike our own DVLC at Swansea, who refuse to handle any requests for details of vehicles and driving licences citing the Data Protection Act, American States operate an open policy under the Freedom of Information Act, merely requiring a fee of about $5 to process each request.

After her mother had kept her silence for so many years, the eventual revelation that Virginia's father had actually been stationed at Chisledon Camp — right opposite her front door — was unbelievable. Suddenly everything fell into place . . . and to her it explained why she felt so emotional every time she walked through the old camp site.

I did ask her if she had thought through the possible consequences of her action as I pointed out that old Jim had probably returned to own family in the States and may now be highly embarrassed to have his past philanderings during World War II brought to light, possibly in front of his wife. Grateful for the advice, the lady rang off.

I thought no more about it until on October 12 a letter arrived postmarked Chisledon:

'Dear Sir,

A while ago I phoned you, to ask your help as I was looking for my father, an American soldier who was here in Swindon in 1944. I have managed to trace my dad and I want to thank you for the help which you so freely gave to me. This information which you gave to me has played a large part in my search, again I thank you so much.

'As I told you my father was based opposite my home in 1944 and I have spent a lot of time at the site of the old camp. It was as a result of my going there, that I was inspired to write the enclosed poem. I wonder would you like to use it in your magazine, if so I will be so pleased.

Please accept this token with my thanks.

Sincerely yours
Virginia Sims'

Four weeks later I was sitting in her lounge sipping coffee as she filled me in on the rest of the story.

The people at the Alabama License Department had been very helpful. Although they had no one listed with the spelling 'Delmar', they gave her several drivers spelt 'Delamar'. Virginia had already established that the name could be spelt either way so she continued the search by phoning each in turn. Her pretext was that she was trying to trace her family tree — which in a way was true! At the fourth or fifth call, to a James Delamar in Opelika, Alabama, the phone was answered by a lady. She said that her husband was deceased and that she had since remarried but she kindly passed on the number of her late husband's mother. When Virginia phoned Mrs Delamar, she said that her son had blue eyes not brown. However she said that she knew another family with the name of Delmar who also had a son James although they had since moved away. Promising to try to trace them, she asked Virginia to call back in a couple of days. When she did so, Mrs Delamar explained that she had found her friend and she was willing to talk to her. Her name was Mrs Willie Mae Turner who now lived with her husband, Albert, in Opelika.

It was Saturday, September 10 when Virginia tried the number. Mrs Turner answered. She listened carefully while Virginia explained her reason for phoning. 'Yes, I hear what you are saying', replied Mrs Turner, 'but is it possible I wonder, that my brother James left a baby back in England?'

Virginia was stunned. She said she just didn't know what to say. 'Well if you tell me a little bit more I'll tell you the truth', blurted Virginia so taken aback.

At the end of a long and expensive phone call she knew that at last her prayers had been answered and that James was the father she had never known. Sadly, though, she would never meet him for he had passed away in April 1986.

Further enquiries over the following weeks with the US Veterans' Affairs confirmed that James Delmar had indeed been a medic/driver, at one time during his service in the UK driving for a general.

With Christmas approaching, the offer by her new-found aunt to come and spend three weeks in Opelika was impossible to refuse. Flying via Atlanta and on to Columbus, Georgia, Virginia and her husband were given a grand welcome.

Here once stood the camp telephone boxes — perhaps her dad had waited on this very spot for a booth to phone her mum.

United States of America

Certification of
Military Service

This certifies that — James W. Delmar
34 332 910

was a member of the — Army of the United States

from — June 29, 1942

to — December 2, 1945

Service was terminated by — Honorable Discharge

Last Grade, Rank, or Rating — Technician Fifth Class

Active Service Dates — Same as above

Given at St. Louis, Missouri, on January 5, 1989

National Personnel Records Center
(Military Personnel Records)
National Archives and Records Administration

THE ARCHIVIST OF THE UNITED STATES IS THE PHYSICAL CUSTODIAN OF THIS PERSON'S MILITARY RECORD.

(This form not valid without official seal.)

In America she had the opportunity of meeting friends and colleagues of her father and of making more enquiries with the people at the Veterans' Affairs office. By the time Virginia was due to fly home one thing was clear: that one day she would return. She felt she had found a certain something that had been missing in her unsettled years in Britain, and that her future lay in making a new life with her very understanding husband in America. The New World beckoned — as it has for so many; now it was just a case of waiting for her application to be answered; the GI baby was at last going home.

CHISELDON CAMP AND THE AVENUE OF TREES 1944

To walk along the avenue, the avenue of trees
And find such peace, serenity, this, anyone would please
The countryside, the quietness, a peaceful moment spend
A story I will tell to you, if you an ear will lend.

This haven's not all it might seem
For me it's more than just a dream
It's history for me brings tears
And will, I know, for many years.

This quiet place was once a camp, for soldiers by the score
Somewhere for them to rest a while, before they went to war
So many men, so young, they came from near and far
Some slept in wooden billet huts, for some their roof a star.

The fields were filled with airmen, so cold for there was snow
No comfort of a fireside, for them no fires glow
As in their tents they lay in wait, for Adolf's cruel reply
For this was war they had to fight, I'm sure they wondered why.

So many of them went to France, to fight this bloody war
They gave their lives, their everything, one could not ask for more.

There were the ones that did survive, to see another day
Italian prisoners, Englishmen, some from the U.S.A.
Back home they went with pride, when war was said and done
For England it was victory, the war was gone and won.

The years have passed as I now walk the avenue of trees
Serenity is there I know, the quietness would please
But soldiers' footsteps I can hear, they march as though for me
Towards the crossroads three abreast, far as the eye can see.

I stare as one just smiles my way
His eyes so tired, what can I say
That smile says please forgive me, forgive what I have done
It was not meant to be this way, I, too, am someone's son.

So for a while I will not pass the avenue of trees
Just think about this peaceful place, it, anyone would please.
This memory it will not fade, although it makes me sad,
Who was this man, my soldier friend, perhaps he was my Dad.

VIRGINIA SIMS, OCTOBER 11, 1988

Virginia feels — indeed she knows — that she is not the only illegitimate child of war searching for a long-lost father. Her message to them is strong with conviction: 'Be diplomatic and as long as you don't hurt anyone, don't ever give up.'

HITLER'S 50th BIRTHDAY PARADE

BERLIN, APRIL 19

Herr Hitler entered upon the celebrations of his birthday — which falls tomorrow — at 5 p.m. today, when he received the SS cadets — members of the new National Socialist 'aristocracy' — who have qualified for commissions in his Black Guards from the SS cadet school in Brunswick. Two hours later the leaders of the National Socialist Party appeared to offer their congratulations, and were succeeded by the old warriors of the party — the wearers of the Blood Order, most prized of National Socialist decorations.

At 9 p.m. Herr Hitler showed himself for the first time to the expectant Berliners, who lined the street for more than four miles from the Chancellery in the Wilhelmstrasse to the Adolf Hitler Platz — the end of the completed section of the new east-to-west 'axis', the motor road out of Berlin which Herr Hitler was to open. The procession of cars, led by Herr Hitler in the front seat of the large tourer, passed slowly through the Brandenburger Tor on to the new road, which blazed with light. Every 20 yards a pediment of plywood, painted white, supported either the German eagle in gilded

'In diesem Hause wurde Adolf Hitler geboren.' After the Austrian Anschluss in 1938 (*see After the Battle No. 59*), this unpretentious building on the Salzburger Vorstadt in Braunau am Inn became a National Socialist shrine. When Hitler was born here on April 20, 1889, his father was employed as a customs official at the frontier post with Germany which lies just 500 metres away by the Simbach river. Hitler's motorcade entered Austria on March 12, 1938 over the same bridge, his triumphant route passing his birthplace in the main street.

On May 2, 1945 Braunau surrendered to the US 13th Armored Division without firing a shot and Hitler's birthplace was taken over by the 80th Infantry Division as a forward command post. In the jeep sits Brigadier General Jay W. Mackelvie, the commanding general of the 80th Division Artillery.

Virtually unchanged over the intervening years, today the building is used by the Lebenshilfe, a social organisation helping handicapped children. After the war Braunau attempted to play down its association with the Führer, his name being a glaring omission in the tourist literature.

papier mâché or a swastika similarly gilded, surrounded by a garland of oak leaves. Powerful lights inside the pediments threw these symbols of German might into sharp relief against the night sky, while at intervals stout plywood pillars, 30 feet high, repeated the same theme on a larger scale.

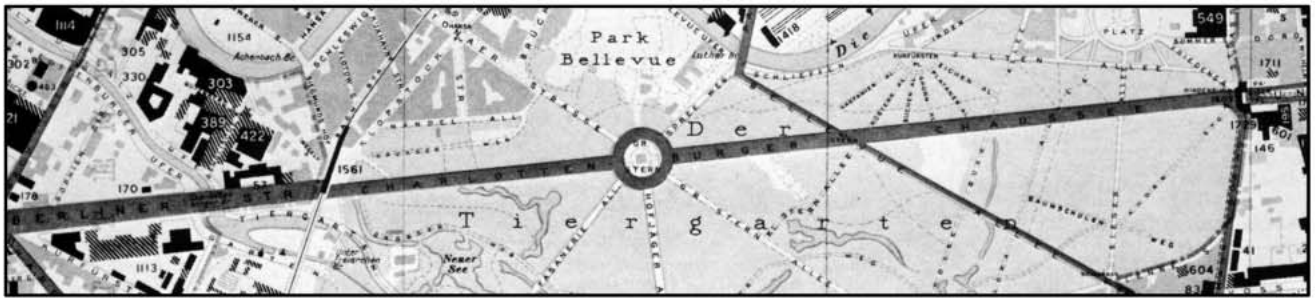
FREDERICK'S LETTERS

Birthday presents for Herr Hitler from party organisations and persons in all parts of the Reich and abroad have been arriving hourly at the Chancellery during the past few days. One which Herr Hitler will particularly cherish was delivered this evening by his Deputy, Herr Hess, in the name of the National Socialist Party. The gift consisted of 50 original letters of Frederick the Great, collected from private owners with the view of forming a collection which should embody, as far as possible, the political philosophy of *Der Alte Fritz*, who is one of Herr Hitler's particular heroes. The letters, which are remarkable as being written in German, since the King as a rule carried on his correspondence in French, are splendidly bound and it may be that their place will be below the bust of Frederick which dominates Herr Hitler's private study.

The last events of the day were a tattoo, in which a large body of troops took part, and a torchlight procession of party formations, which lit up the Wilhemstrasse for half an hour. Finally, Herr Hitler went to bed to the voices of the choir of his own SS bodyguard, which sang to him in the courtyard of the Chancellery.

THE TIMES, APRIL 20, 1939

With the unwelcome publicity being afforded Braunau by film crews preparing to record the 100th anniversary of Hitler's birth in April 1989, it was decided to make the best of a bad job and not dodge the issue. The result was the erection of a memorial stone from nearby Mauthausen concentration camp during the first week of April — not to Hitler personally but in remembrance of his victims. Gerhard Bluhm recorded the scene for us shortly before the stone was officially unveiled.



On the eve of the massive parade to be held to mark Hitler's 50th birthday in 1939, the main event was the opening of the East-West Axis thoroughfare — the first task to be completed in Albert Speer's plans for the rebuilding of the Reichshauptstadt.

Prior to April 19 the road from the Brandenburger Tor running westwards to the Tiergarten S-Bahn bridge (from where the picture was taken) was called the Charlottenburger Chaussee; now it was re-named the Ost-West Achse.

Beyond the bridge, the road became the Berliner Strasse, widened as part of the East-West Axis although constricted by the Charlottenburger Tor, seen in the background.

The reviewing stand was set up opposite the Technische Universität, most of which had to be pulled down after the war and rebuilt although one of the old wings remains.

BERLIN, APRIL 20

Herr Hitler's fiftieth birthday was celebrated today in 'Hitler weather'. That is to say, it was dry and for the most part warm and sunny, so that Berliners needed no urging to take advantage of the national holiday to see the birthday parade. This year it was on double the usual scale — some 40,000 to 50,000 men of all arms marched or rode past the Führer for four hours — and provided a formidable sample of German military strength.

Herr Hitler took the salute from a decorated pedestal in the new broad highway which he opened yesterday. Behind him were Field-Marshal Göring, Commander-in-Chief of the Air Force, General Keitel, Chief of the High Command of the Armed Forces, General von Bauchitsch, Commander-in-Chief of the Army, and Grand-Admiral Raeder, Commander-in-Chief of the Navy.

In a box to his left sat the diminutive Dr Hacha, the Czech President, in dark coat and top hat, beside the large and uniformed figure of the Reich Protector for Bohemia and Moravia, Baron von Neurath.

The Ost-West Achse and Berliner Strasse were renamed the Strasse des 17. Juni five days after the rising against the Communist government in East Berlin in 1953. The white posts mark the centre of the axis of the main University building and most probably the position of Hitler's saluting base. The lamp posts are still the originals designed by Speer. (Comparisons in Berlin were taken for us by Dr Peter Schenk.)

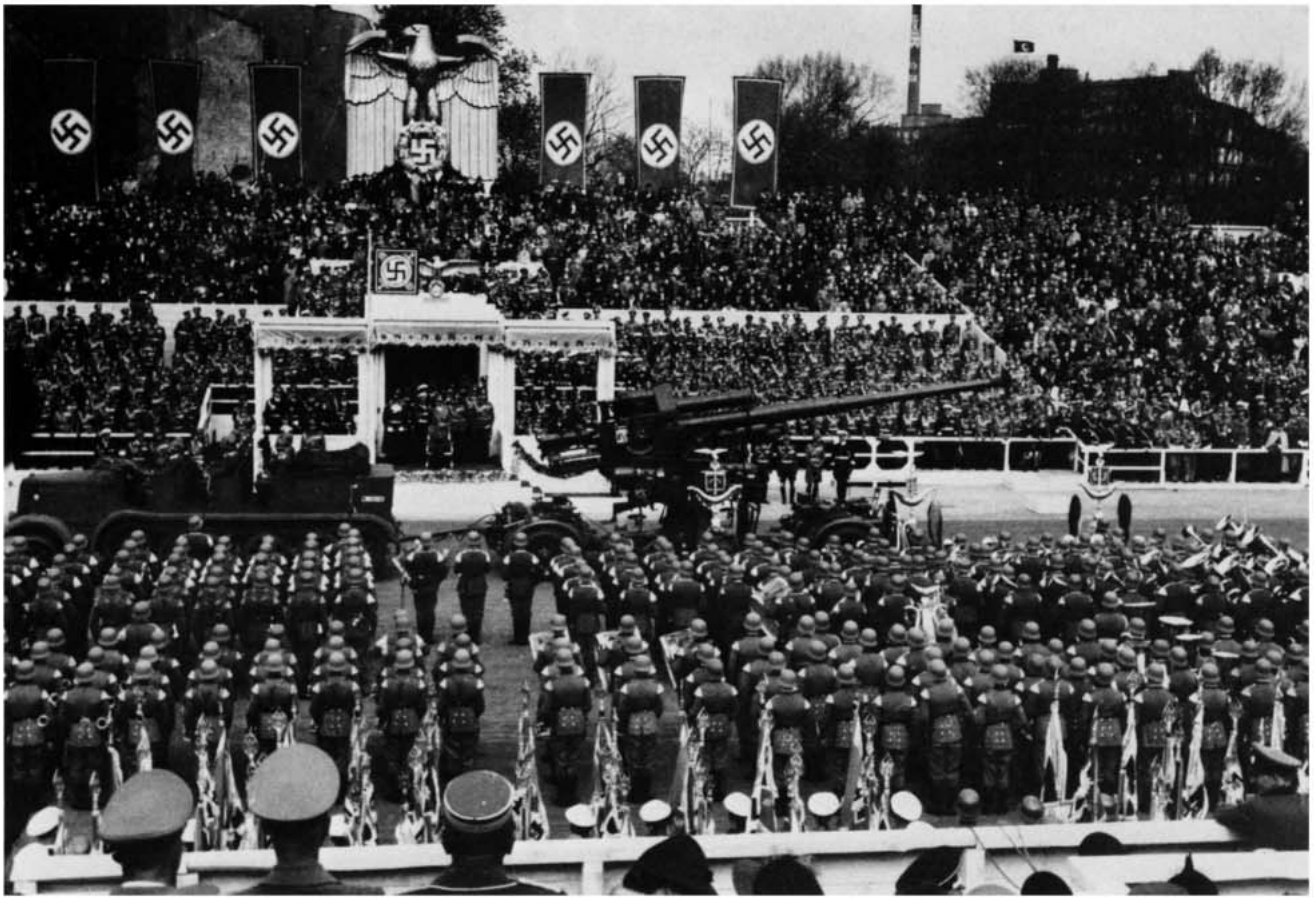
NEW EQUIPMENT

There is little glamour about a modern military parade. Today's was a monotonously efficient procession of vehicles and engines of destruction, and the spirits of the crowd obviously rose when an occasional squadron of dashing cavalry made an appearance. Herr Hitler's birthday is usually interesting for the first public appearance of new equipment, and today's was no exception. There was an anti-aircraft gun of larger calibre than any seen before in the Reich. Observers estimated it as at least 5 in. This new terror for bombers was drawn past by motor vehicles in two sections, barrels and mounting, to the cheers of the crowd and shouts of 'We thank our Leader'.

There were also some light tanks, apparently smaller than any previously in service. These did not drive past under their own power, but were transported in two on lorries and trailers designed apparently to move them from one part of a front to another.

Motorized industry formed an unusually large proportion of the troops on parade. A handy size of vehicle, carrying 11 riflemen, is employed. For the rest, great prominence was given to anti-aircraft and anti-tank weapons. To the disappointment of all observers, the reports current that a detachment of the volunteers from Spain would appear turned out to be ill-founded. For the first time, however, a company of the parachute troops, in harness and carrying rifles or light machine guns, appeared on parade.

For Herr Hitler the most pleasing visit of the day was that of Gauleiter Forster of Danzig, who brought with him a scroll conferring on the Führer the freedom of that city.



GERMANS FROM ABROAD

When the parade was over Herr Hitler drove through the cheering crowds to the Chancellery, where the Bulgarian and Hungarian guests, the only foreign visitors to have been granted a special audience, presented the good wishes of their Governments. The Führer then presided at a tea-party for the foreign guests. The last event of the day was the reception by Herr Hitler of the representatives of Germans living in other European countries, who brought the congratulations of their people and assurances of loyalty to his person. The keynote of these celebrations was set this morning by Field-Marshal Göring, who, in the course of a message to the German people, says:

'Adolf Hitler is the greatest German of all time. . . . Let the politicians and statesmen of the world, which is to us incomprehensible, forge their plans and intrigues; let journalists spout forth poison and gall against us. For us, undisturbed by their shrieks, only the word of Adolf Hitler is valid. To serve him, who as a man of 50 today stands in the full bloom of his creative powers, to help to achieve his magnificent German plans, will in the future, as in the past, be the aim and object of our lives, our actions, and our dealings. The Almighty sent us the Führer at the right time. To Him, in ardent supplication, we raise this prayer: Lord God, protect the Führer and bless his work!'

THE TIMES, APRIL 21, 1939

STEIN AUS DEM
KONZENTRATIONSLAGER
MAUTHAUSEN